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Metropolitan Universities: Economic Engine for the Twenty-first Century

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The metropolitan university, the roots of which lie in the land-grant college of a century ago, is the capital goods producer for the Information Age. As the dynamic of American higher education has moved from small colleges in rural towns to urban universities that attract non-traditional, cosmopolitan students, so has its mission been expanded beyond that of providing affordable educational opportunities to include engagement in outreach and public service. Because the classroom and research laboratory have been transformed into an arena for international economic competition, great urban universities of the twenty-first century must carve their niche in the community by assisting their citizens to identify, analyze, and solve the problems of a rapidly changing, culturally diverse, global environment dominated by computerized technologies, electronic communication, and instantaneous information dissemination.

Today's metropolitan universities have enthusiastically embraced the challenge of the new millennium — community revitalization through economic development. Positioned in the midst of exciting and challenging social and technological advances, urban universities understand what education will look like in the future — responsive, focused, flexible, and dispersed, exploring collaborative educational and economic opportunities with community partners. With the city as a living laboratory, they can participate in innovative cooperative ventures that produce practical solutions to urban problems and revitalization for the community and the institution. Just as the steam engine became the impetus for the Industrial Age, higher education will be recognized as the driving force of the Technological Age.

While recognizing the diverse needs of the urban metropolis, the programmatic structure of the urban university must now be focused on two essential arenas of engagement: (1) increased

student access and curricula reform and (2) community revitalization through economic development and the application of technology to commerce.

Student Access and Curricula Reform

Fundamental to the mission of the urban university is the accommodation of all qualified undergraduates and the availability of a comprehensive range of degree offerings at an affordable cost and at locations and times convenient to the diverse student body it serves. We must be prepared to address those issues central to the education and training of students and provide scholarships and other financial aid that ensure full access to academic opportunities at both the undergraduate and graduate level.

Building on the promise of federally-funded HOPE scholarships and the vision of Patrick F. Taylor, chairman and CEO of Taylor Energy Company in New Orleans, whose nationally acclaimed Taylor Plan is already changing education in America, dozens of states have adopted financial-aid packages that provide college tuition for all academically qualified students. For example, Louisiana's 1997 Tuition Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS), one of the most progressive student-assistance programs in the nation, promises economic development through well-educated, better-prepared citizens and employees for the global village.

Because knowledge is perishable and careers are inconstant, the nation's corporate and government leaders are looking to higher education for solutions to their training needs. Universities are responding by offering structured programs at alternative times and places at an affordable cost and by customizing degree offerings to meet the needs of business and industry. At the University of New Orleans, for example, the School of Hotel, Restaurant, and Tourism Administration, one of a dozen best in the nation, prepares students for lucrative employment in the state's hospitality industry while faculty researchers focus on analyses and studies that advance New Orleans as a tourist destination. In addition, UNO has been successful in responding to the needs of local industry with new programmatic offerings such as the Ph.D. in engineering and applied science and the Hospitality Executive's Leadership Program which provide pathways to executive career opportunities in their respective fields.

Distance learning is now central to the university's outreach mission and has become an essential method of offering courses. Urban universities are utilizing powerful technology to export classes into the community through high-tech data systems, global teleconferencing, satellite broadcasting, and the like, all of which support distance education for workforce development and enhance the community's global competitiveness.

Since preparation is vital to student success, it is likewise the responsibility of the metropolitan university to provide educational support for prospective students. Through a collaborative endeavor with New Orleans entrepreneur Larry Lundy and Pizza Hut, Cox

Communications, and the Plaza and Belle Promenade shopping centers, UNO has established storefront education programs in local shopping malls. Professors and counselors offer ACT test-preparation seminars, tutoring and homework assistance, and General Equivalency Diploma and adult basic-education classes through Operation Mainstream, as well as career counseling and financial-aid information. These outreach efforts have improved test-taking abilities and provided academic support while generating a tremendous amount of community goodwill.

The non-traditional metropolitan student is likely to require more student services than do his or her more traditional peers; for the first-generation college student, this might include career and academic counseling. For the student-parent, a needed service might be high-quality child care at an on-campus children's center similar to UNO's facility, which serves nearly 1,000 students annually for a nominal fee of less than \$2 an hour. Urban universities must also encourage flexibility by providing effortless registration, weekend and night classes, customized programs, evening office hours, and other services that meet the needs of their diverse student body.

In order to build the structure to support development of intellectual capital key to the future of the metropolitan community, the urban public university must: (1) promote early intervention through alliances with elementary and high school constituencies; (2) integrate outreach, career training and retraining, and lifelong learning into its curricula; (3) address the need for customized educational services by offering course work at alternative times and locations; (4) recognize that distance learning is an essential method of course offerings; and (5) improve nontraditional student services. Further, this agenda must be accomplished in an environment that affirms a positive student experience.

University/Community Partnerships

Consistent with their urban mission, metropolitan universities are no longer considered merely institutions of higher learning and research; they are now engaged in economic growth and development as well. Through collaborations with government, businesses, nonprofit agencies, and foundations, the metropolitan university is rechanneling its energies and resources as a partner in the revitalization of the community, particularly in business incubation, technological innovations, governmental reorganization, public planning and development, training and leadership, crime and safety, health and human services, and cultural enrichment.

Some partnerships that have proved highly successful include international trade centers, entrepreneurship programs, and projects that focus on revitalization of central cities and development of visual and performance art complexes. UNO's Technology Enterprise Center, once an empty office tower in the central business district, now houses small innovative businesses that utilize university skills to commercialize technology. The Small

Business Development Center, located at UNO TEC, provides counseling and training for both start-up and ongoing businesses, recommends business programs and helps to create strategic plans and foster sound business practices among entrepreneurs.

In a recent innovative public-private partnership, Avondale Industries, the state of Louisiana, and the University of New Orleans launched a unique enterprise — the UNO-Avondale Maritime Technology Center of Excellence — that was a key element in Avondale's successful bid for a \$641 million LPD-17 Navy shipbuilding contract. The \$40 million facility, owned by UNO and constructed by the state on land adjacent to Avondale's corporate headquarters, will provide faculty and students of UNO's School of Naval Architecture and Marine Engineering, Avondale and other Louisiana shipbuilders with one of the most advanced computer-aided ship design and manufacturing facilities in the nation.

Research and technology parks add important strengths to the urban university mission and foster partnerships where universities and businesses can work together in critical areas of research and development that enable cities to compete internationally. A strategic mix of business, government, and university tenants can create a permanent employment base, generate additional business and governmental revenue for the community, provide opportunities for students to enhance their skills through internships and on-the-job training, and support faculty collaboration with new sources of research funding.

At the UNO Research and Technology Park, for example, a \$38.3-million Naval Information Technology Center will have an estimated \$272-million impact on the state's economy. This major management software research-and-development effort will consolidate and standardize the numerous military personnel information systems into a single system while providing high-paying employment opportunities for more than 1,500 students and graduates and a significant number of local contractors. This type of engagement among the university and state and federal governments is an important catalyst for further economic development of the region.

Federally funded research support is also encouraging new linkages between industry and academia. The UNO Advanced Materials Research Institute received a \$9.2-million contract to develop and commercialize "smart materials" for the computer industry, while UNO-based Gulf Coast Region Maritime Technology Center develops new approaches to ship design and manufacturing, and introduces materials that extend the useful life of ships and aircraft. These pioneer products contributed \$2.9 billion in improved productivity and actual cost savings for the Navy.

The revitalization of central cities and urban communities requires an asset-based strategy built on education and entrepreneurship that sees the urban university as a crucible of experimentation, actively engaged with its community partners. For example, the Historic Lee Circle District in New Orleans has been a

focal point of the arts but fell into disrepair during the past three decades. Through a \$50-million collaborative endeavor, a multi-building UNO Lee Circle Arts Complex will open in Fall 1998, establishing an important university presence in downtown New Orleans and serving as the cornerstone for the renaissance of the city's most renowned traffic circle. The Ogden Museum of Southern Art, housed in the historic 1888 Richardson-designed Patrick F. Taylor Library, will exhibit a \$13-million collection donated to the university by Roger Houston Ogden, one of New Orleans' leading philanthropists.

In partnership with the New Orleans Arts Council and the Louisiana Artists Guild, UNO will also provide the resources to develop an arts center that will include studio, meeting, and retail space, and facilities for the university's arts administration and fine arts master's programs. The project is expected to generate more than a half million visitors and \$97 million in annual economic resurgence while it fulfills its primary mission of sharing the appreciation of the visual arts. Also located in the Historic Lee Circle District is the National D-Day Museum. Funded from state, federal, and private sources, the museum will open in a state-of-the-art facility and will chronicle the story of the most decisive military event of the twentieth century — the Normandy Invasion, the beginning of the end of World War II. The museum will also include UNO's Eisenhower Research Center, an historical archive for scholars and researchers.

For a city and its university to be mutually successful, private enterprise must be given the opportunity to join in supporting the university's expanding influence of education and training for the emerging "brainpower" industries such as computer integration, microelectronics, and advanced telecommunications. With this in mind, UNO instituted the nonprofit University of New Orleans Business/Higher Education Council, a partnership of business leaders and higher education that engages in community outreach programs, defines educational needs at both the university and vocational/technical levels, and promotes educational access, workforce training, and innovative technology through educational, legislative, development, and marketing initiatives.

The Challenge

Nothing is more important to the future of our nation than education, and nothing is more important to the future of education than engagement in innovative public and private partnerships with the community. While America's metropolitan universities are mandated to create, disseminate, and preserve the knowledge base of the country, they are also being held responsible for the economic growth and development of the community. Metropolitan universities must be willing and prepared to foster and implement ideas that further a positive economic environment through research and collaboration; they must promote a strong feeling of personal

leadership in the community and become a pivotal force that helps their cities grow in a revitalized economic environment.

In forging effective partnerships, urban university and community leaders must connect vision and reality, people and information, services and communities. They should recognize that strong, productive partnerships must: (1) involve a shared vision and a mission that serves the real interests of both parties; (2) enhance community strengths and address community weaknesses; (3) accomplish the urban agenda through workforce training, increased job opportunities, and community revitalization; (4) promote intellectual and civic advancement; and (5) develop solutions for economic success in a changing and global economy.

While aggressively pursuing these community linkages, university leaders must engage in continual restructuring, with excellence and outreach the blueprint for every institution's future. The metropolitan university — engaged, dynamic, and responsive — is the twenty-first century engine of economic growth and global competitiveness, shaping the future of our communities through outreach and public service.

About the Authors

Gregory M. St.L. O'Brien (Ph.D., Boston University) is chancellor of the University of New Orleans. He recently served as chairman of the City of New Orleans Commission on Government Reorganization and is a member of the steering committee of the Louisiana Economic Development Council. He is also secretary of state of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, a member of the board of the National Coalition for Advanced Manufacturing, and a member of the executive committee of NASULGC's Commission on the Urban Agenda.

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