Detroit has seen better times, but if Michigan’s Wayne State University has anything to do with it, the Motor City will polish its tarnished reputation. Deeply engaged in helping Detroit lift itself up, Wayne State exemplifies the ideal of an urban university that is committed to its community.

That commitment shows itself, for example, in South University Village, a $36 million real estate development in Midtown Detroit. The product of a university partnership with private developers that opened last July, the project includes a mix of residential facilities, shops and restaurants. Its Studio One Apartments were hailed as the first major market-rate residences to be built in Detroit in more than three decades. South University Village is seen as a cornerstone in Wayne State’s vision to transform Midtown into a thriving urban collegiate community, in part by developing amenities designed to attract a mix of university staff, students and other urbanites.

Another of Wayne State’s significant contributions to its urban community is Detroit’s TechTown, a 43-acre research and technology park and new business incubator that the university created adjacent to campus. With more than 70 start-up or early-stage companies as tenants, TechTown is a growing force in the revitalization of local and state economies. It was recently selected, for example, to house the Wayne County Stem Cell Commercialization Center, the first of its kind in Michigan. Tech Town also creates research opportunities for Wayne State faculty and students.

In distinctive ways appropriate to their unique missions and contexts, urban public universities broadly engage in their communities as a function of regional stewardship.

by Stephen Pelletier

In distinctive ways appropriate to their unique missions and contexts, urban public universities broadly engage in their communities as a function of regional stewardship.
Given that the university as an entity isn’t going anywhere, says Harvey Hollins, Wayne State’s vice president of government and community affairs, it takes very seriously its responsibilities as an anchor in the Detroit community.

Daniel J. Hurley, AASCU’s director of state relations and policy analysis, suggests that one way to think about the engagement of urban universities in their communities is under the umbrella of regional stewardship. In urban institutions, regional stewardship often plays out in the form of local economic development and revitalization. Urban institutions also contribute in other ways—perhaps helping to sustain their region’s environment, improve cultural opportunities, or sustain the health and safety of residents who live near campus. Other universities fulfill their public engagement mission through their curriculum and student learning, perhaps viewing their role as an urban partner in the context of local and regional workforce development.

One of the richest ways in which urban universities approach engagement with their communities involves a reciprocal give and take, in which the university gains as much from its partnership with the community as it gives. Universities recognize that improving their community also strengthens the institution.

From among many possible examples of exemplary work, this article looks at three urban AASCU institutions that have distinguished themselves by virtue of their engagement with their communities.

**Eds and Meds**

Detroit today struggles to reinvent itself in the wake of the erosion of its manufacturing core, observes Robin Boyle, chair of Wayne State’s department of geography and urban planning.

In that light, he says, “the ‘eds’ instead of ‘meds’—the educational institutions and medical institutions and business and organizations that spin around them” serve vital roles as anchors that can help the city redefine its identity, sense of place, and image. In addition to high visibility projects like South University Village, the university’s engagement takes many other forms. For example, Wayne State President Jay Noren appointed a task force to determine how the university can best help the city’s distressed public school system. The university is also exploring how it can better link civic engagement with its substantial research undertakings.

Apart from major building development, part of Wayne State’s strategy has been to focus specifically on what Boyle calls “small wins,” or “being able to demonstrate improvements in the way that this big university can work with the community.”

For example, the university and two nearby health facilities, Detroit Medical Center and the Henry Ford Hospital, each run their own
shuttle services. They want to see if they can combine their efforts into a better bus system that would, literally, connect education, the health system and the neighborhoods. Another initiative will improve communication and data sharing among the seven different police and public safety agencies that patrol Midtown. There’s also an effort to extend Wi-Fi connectivity beyond just the campus and the hospitals to the entire neighborhood.

Such small-scale activity, Boyle says, “is vital to better connect the university to its immediate neighborhood.” As further evidence of Wayne State’s leadership in its community, the university announced in January that it was one of just 111 institutions nationally to be designated a “Curricular Engagement and Outreach & Partnerships” institution by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. That classification recognizes the ethos of community engagement that is inculcated throughout Wayne State’s culture, curriculum, research and public outreach.

**The Way We Do Business Here**

Under the motto “Let Knowledge Serve the City,” Portland State University (Ore.) believes that a core part of its mission is to test and apply theories to address compelling social issues. Of the university’s 27,000 students, some 8,200 connect annually—through the curriculum alone—with the community. Community engagement by student clubs, faculty and staff add many more dimensions to the university’s urban engagement.

Portland State inaugurated its new president, Wim Wiewel, on May 1. On his first day in office, Wiewel biked to work with Portland’s new mayor—a public demonstration of his commitment to both sustainability and community connections. Those are allegiances that Wiewel can back with scholarship: He’s the author or editor of books with such titles as *Global Universities and Urban Development* and *Partnerships for Smart Growth: University Community Collaboration for Better Public Places*. Further evidence of the president’s interest is reflected in the symposium, *Building University-Community Partnerships for a Sustainable Regional Economy*, that was part of his inaugural events.

Most of PSU’s work in urban revitalization does not come in the form of bricks and mortar, but rather person to person, often through the classroom experience. “We here at Portland State see the work of connecting to community, understood broadly, as part of the way we do business here,” says Kevin Kecskes, associate vice provost for engagement and director of community-university partnerships in PSU’s Center for Academic Excellence. “We encourage, support and sometimes cajole” faculty to connect students to the community through the curriculum, Kecskes says. He adds that the fact that his office reports to the provost helps him make the case for engagement with faculty.

The Community Watershed Stewardship Program (CWSP) illustrates Portland State’s version of urban engagement. Now over a dozen years old—and funded by the city of Portland—the program seeks community solutions to the metropolitan area’s increasingly polluted watershed. CWSP funds small grants to schools, churches and other organizations for watershed improvement projects. Students serve as community development resources, helping local groups frame watershed projects and secure funding for them—and integrating their classroom learning with social, economic and environmental realities in the field. Portland, of course, benefits from improved watershed management. CWSP won the inaugural Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Partnership Award for Campus-Community Partnerships.

Portland State can point to scores of other successful programs. Through the university’s department of applied
linguistics, for example, students teach English to adults. Since 1988, a tutoring partnership between the university and the local school system has benefited well over 18,000 migrant and high-poverty K-12 students. Nearly 11,000 PSU students who have engaged in the project have also benefited through the program’s integration of theory with practice and service with learning.

Urban engagement takes a decidedly material form at the point on the PSU campus where the city’s streetcar track runs directly through the Urban Center, one of PSU’s buildings—linking the campus directly with the rest of the city. As another way to draw itself closer to the community, the university recently ponied up money to help ensure that the city’s expanding light rail system could extend as far as the campus.

Kecskes says Portland State recognizes the reciprocity of community engagement. “We don’t see ourselves only as experts who have things to give,” he says. “We’re not just holders of assets and the community holders of needs. We recognize that we also have needs as a university and that our community also has assets.”

**Inspiration from the Top**

Sometimes an urban institution’s success in working with its community results from inspiration on the part of its leadership. That’s the case at the University of Akron (Ohio), whose president, Luis M. Proenza, makes a thoughtful and persuasive case for why urban engagement matters.

The university can rightfully boast about its role as a partner—along with the city of Akron, health providers, schools, the chamber of commerce, local media and developers—in the University Park Alliance, an effort to revitalize a 50-block neighborhood around the campus.

The Alliance received $2.5 million in seed money from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation in 2001 and $10 million in 2007. From that point forward, it started to reclaim, and in some cases repurpose, debilitated sections of Akron.

To date, a new housing development has been constructed two blocks from the university campus. New businesses have sprouted up. The university was able to swap parcels of land to make room for new residence halls and a stadium. Proenza said that with some 1,000 acres up for possible redevelopment, the effort so far feels like a piece here and a piece there, but that overall the project has momentum. Notably, for example, private investment in the Alliance exceeds $300 million. Proenza can envision that amount topping $500 million “and probably coming closer to a billion or a billion and a half.”

Beyond urban revitalization, Proenza takes an even broader view of the urban university’s role in its community. When the Knight Foundation grant was announced, he said that “this effort is not about rebuilding structures. It is about re-energizing a community.” The overarching theme, he says, is one of “creating a sense of place, a sense of community,” and blurring the boundaries between the university and its neighborhood.

In addition to renewing a large section of Akron, Proenza says the university’s role in the Alliance is designed to “create a nexus, a strong set of focal points for the
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university’s interface with the community.” Viewing the university as a catalyst, he says “we’re trying to create opportunities both for ourselves and the private sector to do good things that are good for business.”

Ultimately what we are interested in is transformational change, change that will make a difference in the health and well-being of this set of neighborhoods,” Proenza says. To that end, for example, the university collaborated with local major medical centers and a medical school to develop a BioInnovation Institute. The partners may jointly develop a health sciences campus. At the same time, they also have their eye on grassroots ways to infuse both learning and health and wellness practice into daily life in the community.

Active nationally with colleagues at other urban institutions that are engaged in their communities, Proenza believes that the practice of urban engagement is moving to a new phase. Developmental work is taking place, he says, to build better conceptual frameworks for urban activity. Practitioners are developing metrics to measure progress. Another positive sign is that a body of scholarship is emerging on urban engagement topics. “It’s almost as if you have moved the land grant idea for the public good into the 21st century,” Proenza says. “Today, it’s not just agriculture and the mechanical arts, but it’s every discipline in the university becoming relevant to the community. What better place to be relevant than in the areas that immediately surround the university?”

Distinctive Paths

While all urban universities engage with their communities, it’s fascinating to see the differences in how schools approach that work.

At the City University of New York, for example, Jay Hershenson, senior vice chancellor for university relations, cites the university’s charter from the Legislature as its mandate to contribute to urban life in the city’s five boroughs. Accordingly, conscious decisions to develop the city’s workforce and quality of life permeate the university’s curriculum and cultural offerings.

Urban engagement is explicitly part of the mission at UMASS Boston, in the form of a commitment to “devote a high proportion of research and public service activities to the cultural, social and economic development….and the well being of citizens of this region.” John Ciccarelli, the school’s associate vice chancellor for government relations and public affairs, says that urban engagement is simply part of the university’s DNA, manifesting itself in community connections through countless courses, programs and extracurricular activities.

As just one more example, California State University, East Bay, views regional workforce development as one dimension of its strong commitment to regional stewardship. In that regard, CSUEB was recently awarded a $100,000 grant to develop programs to improve student success in science and math.

In a sense, it is all about context. Each urban university engages with its community in ways that fit with that institution’s mission, location and specific circumstances. The overall result—as the examples above attest—adds up to a portfolio of noteworthy initiatives. Clearly, urban universities are doing much to improve economics, opportunities and overall livability in urban centers across the country.

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