

Urban Colleges Learn to Be Good Neighbors

Universities Also Reap Benefits From Investing in Their Communities

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PHILADELPHIA -- Ten years ago, the University of Pennsylvania was under siege, its ivy towers wretched by an abandoned industrial wasteland, filth and soaring crime. Parents feared for their children after two student homicides. The neighborhood McDonald's was nicknamed McDeath. Students were virtual prisoners on campus.

Administrators began to worry that enrollment was threatened as one of the nation's oldest and most prestigious schools was fast developing a reputation as unsafe.

"They had one of two choices after the murders. They could build up more barricades, surround them with a moat and fill the moat with dragons," said Barry Grossbach, a community activist in the West Philadelphia neighborhood. "Or they could reach out and save the community. . . . It was self-preservation."

Penn chose the latter. The university and private developers have invested about a billion dollars over the past decade in security, retail, schools, the local housing market and what Penn refers to as "economic inclusion" -- making sure the community and minority companies get a piece of the success.

Today, Penn is among the hottest schools in the country -- sitting smack in the middle of a clean and vital retail neighborhood where crime has been reduced by 49 percent in the past decade, and where students swarm the streets shopping at upscale stores. Penn has jumped in the U.S. News & World Report college rankings to No. 4 and attracts significantly more applicants -- successes that school administrators attribute in large part to Penn's "West Philadelphia Initiative."

Penn is at the forefront of a national trend of urban colleges that are aggressively trying to bridge "town-gown" tensions by investing heavily in adjacent troubled neighborhoods -- and by making a connection with local civic life. Since Penn launched its efforts in 1996, officials from more than 100 schools have made pilgrimages to study how it transformed a decaying neighborhood with a thriving drug traffic into a vibrant college community.

The sea change on city campuses comes when urban school applications are at an all-time high -- up 14 percent since 2002 -- as the children of baby boomers drift away from bucolic academic settings toward the action.

"The return to urban schools reflects a broad shift in popular culture -- cities are cool again," said Bruce Katz, urban expert at the Brookings Institution. Consequently, "there is a greater appreciation that a university's fortunes reflect the place in which they are situated -- there is no separating the interests," he

added. "They know they have to step up to the plate."

Many schools have. Yale University -- in the notoriously shabby downtown of New Haven, Conn. -- has developed retail and office space nearby, offered financial incentives to employees to buy homes in the neighborhood, and joined with local schools to offer tutoring, internships and college advisers. Trinity College and local partners spent more than \$100 million to turn a run-down area in Hartford, Conn., beset by drive-by shootings and condemned buildings into a 16-acre Learning Corridor with four local schools. Temple University, in a marginal neighborhood in North Philadelphia, is involved in running local schools and is working with developers to bring in restaurants and retail.

Clark University in Worcester, Mass., took similar steps, improving the historically poor and run-down area around the college by opening a school that starts in seventh grade, renovating housing and providing funding to refurbish storefronts.

In Columbia University's historic struggle with Harlem in 1968, the school proposed building a gym near the campus, touching off neighborhood opposition and the student takeover of five buildings. Facing new suspicions over expansion plans, the school established a 40-member community advisory council in 2003 to assure residents that the plans will come with job training, jobs and opportunity for small businesses.

In the District, schools have struggled to smooth community tensions brought on by campus expansion and rowdy students. At Howard University, administrators started investing in the community about a decade ago, agreeing to rehabilitate 28 run-down, boarded-up houses that the school had owned for 30 years, and had once intended for use in an expansion. Howard took a loss to offer the homes at reasonable prices to university staff members. Community relations improved overnight.

Howard established its Center for Urban Progress to tie academic programs to work in the community, and last August opened a magnet middle school on campus. The college is working to develop a new residential-retail center on Georgia Avenue that it hopes will bring life back to community streets.

"We see ourselves as an extension of the community," said Maybelle Taylor Bennett, director of the Howard University Community Association. "It's enlightened self-interest."

The issues are different for Georgetown University and George Washington University, which are in upscale residential and business areas that do not need the intervention and financial support required by Hartford or West Philadelphia. Still, seeking to maintain strong relations, the two schools established a 24-hour hotline so neighbors can report loud parties or other inappropriate student behavior.

As a case study, Penn's urban renewal effort is probably the most comprehensive -- targeting every service and institution that makes a community vibrant. The university restored shuttered houses and offered faculty incentives to move into the neighborhood; invested \$7 million to build a public school; brought in a much-needed 35,000-square-foot grocery store and movie theater; and offered the community resources such as hundreds of used Penn computers.

"We said we teach our students about civic engagement. You can't do that and not be role models for civic engagement," said former Penn president Judith Rodin, who was a catalyst in the renewal efforts.

But Penn was a long time coming to that philosophy, and when it began its overtures the community was skeptical. In the 1950s and '60s, the university -- with the help of federal and local officials -- displaced residents to expand. Homes were abandoned, businesses fled, crime took over -- and Penn

simply fortified its walls.

"We destroyed a neighborhood that had existed for 50 years. And we replaced it with a neighborhood that had no life, no vibrancy on the streets," said Omar Blaik, Penn's senior vice president for facilities and real estate services.

"The animus," Rodin said, "was legitimate."

Rodin arrived in 1994 at a low point for the university. During her first month, a 26-year-old graduate student was robbed and killed outside his West Philadelphia apartment. By mid-1996, 30 armed robberies had occurred near the university, an undergraduate was shot and wounded, and Vladimir Sled, a Russian doctoral student, was stabbed to death trying to thwart a robbery.

"We hit the wall," recalled Maureen Rush, Penn's vice president for public safety. ". . . It was clearly becoming an issue for admissions."

Administrators quickly agreed that there had to be a full-scale assault on the problem. The first steps were to form a partnership with community leaders and neighborhood associations and to light the neighborhood, clean it and make it green. Lights were enhanced at 1,200 properties, and 400 trees were planted as well as 10,000 flower bulbs.

Gradually, university buildings were refaced to open out toward the streets, and all new buildings had ample windows facing the street, making the school appear welcoming and providing additional lighting on the streets for safety. The school spends more than \$20 million annually on security -- among the highest amount in the country. It employs 350 security officers and 100 sworn police officers, who operate out of a station on campus.

So heightened is the concern over security today that a recent uptick in robberies near campus triggered a quick and intensive response. The school enlisted the help of a patrol task force from the city police department, and added street lighting and surveillance cameras at intersections to the 300 already around the campus.

But in 1996, even with cleaner, greener and safer streets, businesses were not rushing back, saying it was too risky to be a pioneer. "We'd lay out the red carpet -- we'd even plan the path so they wouldn't see anything unattractive," Blaik said. "But we'd still get a letter saying, 'No, thank you.' "

It was clear that if the neighborhood was going to be developed, Penn had to cover much of the risk. Rodin went to the board of trustees for seed money -- dismaying faculty members who thought the money should be spent on academics.

The trustees bought into the vision. Within a few years, Penn moved its bookstore off campus to encourage foot traffic, and brought in retailers such as Urban Outfitters and the Gap. Today, there is a waiting list of retailers and developers. The most recent project is a \$100 million development of apartments and commercial space.

To bring back residents, Penn spent several million dollars renovating 20 dilapidated houses and priced them so middle-class residents could afford them. Nearly 1,000 employees have accepted the incentives to buy homes in the community.

But most people agree that the most important thing the university did was commit to build a public

school. "That changed everything," said Tony Sorrentino, director of external affairs for the facilities office. "It brought families back."

The Penn Alexander School, which covers kindergarten through eighth grade, is an airy, glassy building that sits right outside of Penn's campus and serves 500 students. Penn's education department plays a major role in developing the school's curriculum and hiring its teachers. Penn has committed \$1,000 per student annually for 10 years to ensure the quality of the school remains stable.

"The goal was to solidify and stabilize the neighborhood," said Nancy Streim, associate dean for graduate and professional education. She is working on plans for an international studies high school.

Today, Penn's popularity is such that it accepts about 20 percent of applicants, compared with 37 percent a decade ago, said Lee Stetson, dean of undergraduate admissions. And with much of the infrastructure done or in planning stages, administrators say that they have the time to further personalize their commitment to the community.

To that end, Penn is in the process of opening a community health clinic at a high school. The medical center offers a "Service Learning Academy" to high school students interested in health care, and a cardio-cancer center will create 1,500 jobs. For the first time, Penn this fall invited local high school students to campus for a tour -- 600 showed up. An administrator e-mails the Penn community weekly, itemizing the community's needs and asking for volunteers.

"This is the time to move forward with a very people-friendly plan for the neighborhood," Amy Gutmann, Penn's president, said as she ticked off a long list of current programs and future plans. "It's very important not to be complacent. All this is what keeps Penn riding high."