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At the Edge: University-based Institutes and Their Communities

Ethan Seltzer

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The urban university has emerged as a distinct representative of American higher education (Waetjen and Muffo: 1983). The founding or transformation of universities to serve their immediate urban environments has re-emerged to focus new attention on the role for place in traditional teaching, research, and service components of the university.

The notion that universities should seek and maintain relationships between their main mission, teaching and research, and area communities, and that they have a responsibility to do so, is still hotly debated and far from settled (Shalala:1991; Stukel:1994; Greiner:1997). Lee Benson and Ira Harkavy note that the idea of not just a role but a responsibility for universities to connect with their communities is a question that "...is particularly hard to answer at present because, among numerous other reasons, academics have ignored it so studiously." (1997)

Barry Checkoway, in a review of efforts to "reinvent" the research university to incorporate community partnerships, notes that universities with some of the greatest intellectual resources in the world are inaccessible to the communities within which they reside (1997). He identifies the key roles that institutional culture and systems of rewards have played in defining the relationships that universities have with their communities, and in throwing up barriers to redefining those relationships either institutionally or through the often heroic efforts of individual faculty members. Henry Louis Taylor, in a response to Checkoway's review, notes that resistance to change should be expected, but that ultimately change will come because it has to if universities are to participate as vital partners in the ongoing evolution of society (1997).

Like other efforts at institutional restructuring or innovation, the full-flowering of the modern urban university is a work in progress. Whether we can identify a formula for success, or not, remains to be seen. Nonetheless, universities are moving ahead to design and implement a wide range of university-community linkages and, in the process, are generating new insights into the extent to which universities and communities can substantively join in common purpose.

This paper reports on the experience at Portland State University with the creation and first six years of operation of the Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies. Like most university-based research and service centers, the Institute sits far enough outside of traditional disciplinary and functional attributes of the university to be regarded as a marginal activity within the university culture. However, because of its marginality, and in light of the tendency for innovation in higher education to occur at the fringe (Smith: 1993), studying the experiences

associated with creating and managing these kinds of institutes and centers can provide a window into the nature of the challenge identified by Checkoway, Benson and Harkavy, Taylor, and others.

This paper is organized into three sections. The first describes the history, mission, organization, and activities of the Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies. The second section reviews the lessons learned in its brief tenure. Third, the paper concludes with some comments on the implications of these lessons for the future of the Institute and similar activities associated with the emergence of Portland State University, and perhaps others, as an urban university.

The Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies

Beginning in 1987, Dr. Nohad Toulan, Dean of Portland State University's College of Urban and Public Affairs, convened a four-person task force made up of representatives from Metro (the regional government in the Portland metropolitan area), Multnomah County, and the City of Portland to discuss the creation of a university-based institute to extend the resources of higher education to metropolitan area communities. The proposed Institute's principal functions would be to:

- Sponsor and fund public service research;
- Facilitate an exchange of information and transfer of technology;
- Provide a forum for public officials and citizens to discuss policy issues.

In 1989, Oregon Governor Neil Goldschmidt created the Governor's Commission on Higher Education in the Portland Metropolitan Area to plan for the future. Its final report recommended that the future for Portland State University should be as an "urban grant university" serving the 5-county Portland-Vancouver metropolitan area (Governor's Commission: 1990). Included in this vision was the creation of an institute consistent with the vision put forth by Dean Toulan, and christened the Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies.

Shortly after the release of the Governor's Commission report, Portland State University President Judith Ramaley spearheaded development of the University's Strategic Plan to act on the urban grant university vision. Using the strategic plan as a guide, the University fashioned the "Portland Agenda," a set of key program initiatives to be funded directly by the state that were consistent with the mission of an urban university. These program initiatives included creating the Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies.

Armed with the support of the University and the Oregon University System, support for the development of the Institute from surrounding counties and major cities was obtained. Early in this process, the City of Portland not only voiced its support for the new Institute in concept, but pledged \$100,000 to "seed" the start-up program and fundraising efforts for this new initiative.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of the Institute is the central policy-making role vested in its community-based board. Its charter calls for naming a 23-member board with three categories of membership:

- 7 members drawn from the elected leadership of large cities, counties, special districts, and Metro;
- 10 members drawn from throughout the region, seeking gender and racial diversity and a balance of private sector and community-based organization leaders; and
- 6 members selected at-large to ensure a mix of interests and talents on the board, including a representative from Oregon Health Sciences University.

The Dean of the College of Urban and Public Affairs serves on the Board in an ex-officio role, but no University faculty, staff, or administration member has a vote. This was intentional and reflects that University's commitment to providing a strong voice for the communities of the region in the design, development, and operations of the Institute.

In September 1992, the author was appointed as the first director for the Institute, on the recommendation of a hiring committee composed of University and community representatives. The first meeting of the Board with its new director was held in late 1992. In 1994 the Board was expanded to include representation from Columbia County, added to the Federal definition of the metropolitan area early that year

At its first "retreat" in 1994, the Board identified a role for the Institute as a catalyst in the metropolitan region. More than simply a broker, the Board envisioned the Institute as a vehicle for identifying critical metropolitan issues and actively working to create a constituency to give them the attention they deserved. By charter, the Board also establishes policy for the Institute, validates a list of critical regional issues and research questions, identifies and cultivates appropriate funding sources, approves an annual operating plan, assists the university with the evaluation of the Director, and takes a leading role in developing an Annual Leadership Symposium, a public event drawing 200-300 elected officials, civic leaders, public employees, and citizens.

The Institute has three sources of financial support. The University provides ongoing core support, consisting of salaries for the Director, a secretary, and a services and supplies budget. In recent years, the University has also supplied a portion of the time of two faculty members and has assigned up to six graduate research assistants to the Institute each academic year.

The Institute is designed to remain small. Rather than hiring a research staff, the broker role envisioned for the organization includes moving research projects directly into the hands of faculty or into standing research centers both at Portland State University and elsewhere in higher education.

The second source of support has been local government. In addition to the initial contribution of \$100,000 by the City of Portland, the Institute raised an

additional \$75,000 from other jurisdictions and agencies to create an unrestricted seed fund for new initiatives. Subsequent funding for ongoing projects has been developed on a case-by-case basis. The third source has been contracts and grants.

The earliest descriptions of the Institute included the development of an endowment that, over time, could fund both core operations and provide a pool of funds for supporting research. For its first five years, the Board of the Institute did not pursue an endowment, largely for two reasons. First, the idea of the Institute is new. Raising a significant endowment for a new, emerging institution is extremely difficult, and doubly so when the territory of interest is metropolitan in scope.

Second, the loss of local ownership of major corporations, utilities, and banks, coupled with an immediate press for endowment funding by almost every other major cultural institution in the region, made seeking an endowment even more difficult than originally envisioned. As in many metropolitan areas, the landscape for fundraising has changed substantially

Today, the mission of the Institute is to serve the region and further the urban mission of Portland State University by:

- providing new access to the resources of higher education for area communities;
- helping to make an understanding of the metropolitan area of strategic value to citizens, faculty, students, elected officials, and civic leaders;
- providing a neutral forum for the discussion of critical metropolitan policy issues;
- creating partnerships linking faculty, students, and community groups to meet community and scholarly objectives; and
- sponsoring public service research.

The Institute is primarily a service center in the university and the community. It serves both as a “new front door” for higher education and as an active participant in the civic life of the metropolitan area. Its roles as both broker and catalyst are intentional, and help to define the role for the Institute among other university-based centers for research and public service. Four primary initiatives form the core of the Institute’s activities:

I. Creating University-Community Partnerships--The Institute seeks to develop partnerships involving faculty, students, and community groups. Past partnerships have included the linkage of the urban design studio in the architecture program with an understaffed but quickly growing suburban community, and an ongoing partnership with the Urban League of Portland to sustain a new “Center for Community Research” created to provide technical and research assistance to small community-based groups. In addition to formal partnerships, the Institute provides a clearinghouse for internships, assists with linking clients to university-based service providers, and helps identify community-based clients for class and faculty projects

The Institute's newest initiative is PSU@HOME, a van and equipment needed to provide a "mobile storefront" for the university and the Institute. This project will provide Internet and Geographic Information System access, training, and technical assistance to citizens, community groups and jurisdictions in the metropolitan area.

II. Promoting Metropolitan Collaboration—Many if not most community issues are common to a wide range of metropolitan area communities. To promote the creation of new collaborative partnerships to address regional issues, the Institute has developed several projects to help explain the common features of the metropolitan area:

- **Metropolitan Clearinghouse/Institute Web Page**—The Institute's web page (<http://www.upa.pdx.edu/IMS/>) provides access to all jurisdictions and a wide range of community groups and resources in the metropolitan area. In addition, it houses the Institute's clearinghouse for reports, plans, and other informational materials produced by area jurisdictions and service providers. The clearinghouse provides searchable abstracts and contact information.

- *Metroscape*—This magazine is produced twice each year for a general audience. It includes information about metropolitan issues, history, and innovations, along with an atlas section linked to a topic. Past atlas sections have focused on poverty and race, metropolitan area agriculture, and public education.

- *The Catalyst*—The Institute's quarterly newsletter, reporting on the actions of the Board and special projects.

- **Annual Leadership Symposium**—The Symposium is a project of the Board and is supported by staff. This annual event has been organized to bring new ideas into the region, bring leaders face-to-face, and to help refine the Institute's projects. Past speakers have included Michael Lerner, Daniel Kemmis, Jody Kretzman, Robert Putnam, Francis Moore Lappé and Paul DuBois, Bill Potapchuk, and Warren Wagar. For the past two years, the event has featured joint presentations by Washington Governor Gary Locke and Oregon Governor John Kitzhaber.

- *Metropolitan Briefing Book*—The Institute's biennial compilation of critical metropolitan issues and emerging regional trends. This document has been developed for a target audience of newly elected officials, especially state legislators from the metropolitan region.

III. Issue Development—From time to time the Institute is contacted to help with the development of issues and projects in the metropolitan region. This is an ongoing process that may or may not yield new additions to the project categories listed above. Currently the Institute has received grant funding to support its "Regional Connections" project, a investigation of the underlying sources of strength in the metropolitan area economy with special attention to the major clusters in its traded or export sector. It is also helping to convene the

“Neighboring Cities Forum,” an organization drawing together small towns outside the core of the region but attempting to cope with the growth occurring here now.

IV. Administration and Board Development—Administrative tasks are largely managed by the director. They include oversight for day-to-day operation of the Institute and support for activities of its employees, service to the Board, and interacting with other parts of the university and college management structure, ongoing liaison with and service to the President’s office and other units on campus, and responding to requests for information.

Most recently, the Institute’s Board has been revisiting the ongoing and long-term funding needs for the Institute. Today the Institute is the only civic organization with a metropolitan span of interest. It has become known for its publications, role as a neutral forum, and ability to develop new and engaging information about the metropolitan area. Unlike in previous years, the Board has formed a Development Committee and committed itself to two central fundraising activities.

First, in conjunction with Portland State University’s first endowment campaign, the Board will seek an endowment for the Institute to develop and sustain three essential strategies for advancing metropolitan aims in the years ahead:

- 1) Community Research Trust—a dedicated source of funds that can be invested in the research priorities of the metropolitan community and to understand new issues, explore best practices, and learn from local and regional experiences.
- 2) Building Bridges—The recent experience of the Institute with its bistate conferences highlights the role that it can play as a convener and bridge builder. In the future, the Institute will seek to become an important catalyst in bridging the divide between urban and rural/small town Oregon, and in promoting community-building among metropolitan area jurisdictions themselves. In both of these cases—inter-regional and intra-regional relationships—the Institute has proven that it can add value and help things happen. A stronger, better supported effort will help to ensure the creation of relationships needed by this region in the years ahead.
- 3) Stable Funding for Core Activities—The critical issues research reported in *Metropolitan Briefing Book*, the semiannual publication of *Metroscope*, and the ongoing development of the *Regional Connections* program need to be supported by stable, ongoing funding. Together, these three projects help to consistently portray the dynamics that tie the communities of the metropolitan area together, and are the only ongoing effort to do so.

An endowment for the Institute, applied to these three program areas, will respond to the present and emerging needs of the communities of the region, help to build a stronger regional community, and strengthen Portland State’s urban university role.

Second, the Board will convene two kinds of groups to better connect community interests with Institute activities and goals. Geographic ties will be made through

Board-member hosted county roundtables in each of the six metropolitan area counties. Issue or programmatic ties will be made through the development of leadership councils tied to ongoing Institute projects. Both geographic and issue groups will be convened on a pilot basis in the next year.

Lessons Learned

- **We're not the First.** To better understand its own aims and experience, the Institute developed a very brief survey of similar research and service institutes at other self-identified urban universities. Among the universities that responded can be found examples of a wide range of partnership activities, occurring at scales ranging from the firm to the organization to the neighborhood, city, region, and state. Two consistent themes are evident. First, all of the efforts surveyed receive some form of hard, core support either from their universities or, in the case of public institutions, from their legislature. In almost all cases, core support was contingent on demonstrating a partnership, either among universities or between universities and community or jurisdictional bodies

Second, most institutes and centers, though dedicated to university-community partnerships, are governed by either the faculty involved or by the faculty in consultation with department heads and deans. Some of these efforts incorporate community advisory boards, but the survey discovered none similar to the Institute, where policy direction is explicitly delegated to a community-based board

- **Is it a Broker or Is it a Catalyst?** In general, we've found that playing the role of both broker and catalyst entails an extra degree of complexity. The steady stream of inquiries coming in over the telephone and now e-mail could keep the Institute busy. The catalyst role is more intentional and competes for time and resources. Balancing the two is an ongoing task and blurs the line between the Institute as an intermediary in the university family of service and research centers on one hand, and on the other, the Institute as a service center with its own research and civic agenda

When polled, members of the Institute's Board report that one of the great satisfactions of serving is the opportunity to learn about the region and meet leaders from other communities. University institutes and centers can both assemble new information and bring it to the public in ways that help to positively build a regional sense of place, and in our experience there is interest and support for these activities.

- **Partnerships take time.** Through its broker role, the Institute has learned that setting up a one-term partnership takes as much time as one that might last for five years. Consequently, staff looks for opportunities to establish three to five year partnerships, and utilizes an explicit memorandum of understanding that spells out the roles for faculty, the Institute, and community partners throughout the life of the agreement. By agreeing to be there for what is relatively the "long term," the Institute and by extension the University agrees to be there for both

the successes and the failures, learning from and sharing responsibility for both. There really is a “next time” and everyone knows it from the start.

- **Faculty are not the same as Staff.** In general, faculty make somewhat ambivalent consultants. Good customer service is not an explicit criterion for attaining either tenure or promotion. Consequently, faculty should be sought for consultant roles only when roles and expectations have been clearly spelled out and agreed to. In addition, unless you have explicitly acquired 100% of a faculty member’s FTE, and unless it is clear that the work they’re doing for you will “count” towards promotion and tenure, you won’t have the ability to direct their time to the more mundane aspects of either the broker or catalyst role.

In the university, even funded projects won’t attract principal investigators if they can’t meet the needs that key faculty have for scholarly recognition by their departments and disciplines. That this is an issue requiring special and sustained attention can be found in the recent two-issue series on faculty rewards and the definition of scholarship in “Metropolitan Universities” (Caret and McMahon:1997). Though Portland State has been aggressively pursuing a (re)definition of scholarship consistent with its urban university mission, that process is ongoing and will take time to have an effect (Johnson and Wamser:1997). Further, whether it can assist faculty with their relationships with their discipline remains to be seen. In the meantime, the Institute has taken a pragmatic approach, developing partnerships linked to methods classes or other studio courses where engagement can occur as part of the curriculum.

Intellectual freedom, like power, consists primarily in having control over the formulation of the questions, rather than merely the provision of the answers. Since, by definition, partnerships involve sharing power, and therefore objectives and credit, existing reward structures are particularly harsh for the involvement of junior faculty, despite the fact that they are often most open to engaging the community in their work.

- **People love to learn about their metropolitan areas.** Consistently, the activities that have been most positively received are those that have provided new information about the nature and dynamics of the metropolitan area. The Institute’s publications, particularly the magazine *Metroscape*, are cited on surveys as products of particular value to Institute stakeholders. When asked to evaluate events sponsored by the Institute, participants give high marks to opportunities to connect with people and communities they are not familiar with.

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- **Region and Community, Macro and Micro.** During the past six years, the work of the Institute has evolved with a focus on two geographies, the region and the community. Our presence as the only civic organization with a metropolitan span of interest in the region is a testament to the ambiguous role that the region plays as the geographic unit for community for most people. In addition, the web of political, market, community, and social boundaries, coupled with the physical landscape itself, can all work against attaining a metropolitan view.

This is slowly changing. Recent work by Neal Peirce (1993), Myron Orfield (1997), and Manuel Pastor, et. al. (1997) is bringing renewed attention to metropolitan regions and intrametropolitan relationships. In the future, whether the Institute plays the role it's currently playing at the metropolitan level is an open question, but it's an important responsibility in the region today

Second, the Institute has also needed to be present at the very local level. There are tremendous things happening at the block and neighborhood level in this region today. This most local definition of community is, in fact, where solutions to community problems are being found on a daily basis. Consequently, in addition to be recognized at the regional level, the Institute and the university need to be engaged close to the grassroots as well. These two scales then, metropolitan and local, have emerged in the Institute's work as the geographies that matter and where both the Institute and the University can and should make a difference.

This has led to an interesting phenomenon. Often staff are asked to simply be present as a neutral observer. The Institute's presence is often requested to aid with smoothing the process, or to provide feedback. The Institute can raise issues as observations that, if raised by a unit of government would be regarded as an agenda. For example, the Institute, its Board and staff, can raise the topic of tax reform without anyone expecting the organization to already have a vested interest in current and projected revenues.

However, this role as a "presence" is extremely difficult to fund, and is more like technical assistance than research or direct service. Consequently, core support is essential to enable organizations like the Institute to serve the community across a full spectrum of engagements. Although the university in our community is viewed as neutral ground, faculty citizenship and attitudes run the full spectrum of political, economic, social, and cultural outlooks and beliefs found in our communities.

In fact, the whole topic of faculty citizenship deserves greater attention. Portland State University sustains the presence of 500 individuals with advanced degrees in our region. How this "braintrust" manifests itself in the civic life of the region, quite apart from more formal avenues like the Institute, is a question that deserves further study

- **The Director.** Despite the role for the Board as policymaker, the director puts a personal stamp on both the operation and products of the Institute. Again, in

light of the reward system operating within the university, this is to be expected. However, it bears keeping in mind that the long-term interests of an organization like the Institute lies in its ability to be known for its mission, rather than for its last project. If the definition of the mission for or character and day-to-day priorities of the Institute change with each director, then we may be sacrificing more than we know

- **Board Development.** Finally, Board development is an ongoing task. The Institute is different than a nonprofit. It is lodged within the University, a large organization that is publicly funded, and it identifies with a territory that has no “natural” constituency. Therefore, service on the Board of the Institute is a task different than most experienced civic actors may have encountered. Although board members report that one of the things they most appreciate about serving on the Board is the opportunity to discuss the region with others they would never otherwise encounter, the nature of the Institute makes it hard for Board members to describe board service to others in terms used in conjunction with other more traditional civic, cultural, or community groups.

The Future

Though the Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies has tried to identify itself with the main teaching and research mission of the University, like so many other research and service centers at Portland State University and on other campuses it remains outside of the central functions of most departments. In addition, the catalyst role identified for the Institute by its board is a role at the far fringes of departmental and faculty activity.

This tension between broker and catalyst, center and fringe, can also be related to the tension between universities as “ivory towers” and as participants in cutting-edge issues of societal growth and change. This is an age-old dialogue and it will continue. Both knowledge production and application are important.

However, marginality may also be a reflection of the true nature of the university: a gathering of self-governing, decentralized units, each of which draws its identity from affiliation with a discipline and from the interests and character of faculty. If so, the notion of restructuring universities as urban universities may need to be tempered by an expectation for incorporating university-community partnerships as a way of thinking, and then acting, rather than simply as an article of bureaucratic structure

Throughout its tenure, the Institute has also experienced a tremendous amount of change within the university itself. When the Institute was created, Portland State was without a reformulated undergraduate curriculum, had no School of Government, did not require a community-based “capstone” experience for all undergraduates, did not have revised promotion and tenure guidelines that created a path to recognize community service as a form of scholarship, and did not have a center on campus to support the creation of curriculum-based university-community partnerships through training, technical assistance, and cash awards.

Today, Portland State has all of these things. In some cases, this has allowed the Institute to hand some of its pilot projects and functions to new entities on campus. In others, it has allowed the Institute to favor its catalyst role over its broker role. In any case, the university is changing, and with it the Institute has changed as well. While the Institute will continue to serve the university and the community, the nature of that service will be and should remain a work in progress.

Finally, the ultimate challenge for this Institute and this University is the challenge facing the entire region: to be an exemplary region to live, do business, grow up, and grow old in. Neither Portland State or the Institute are seeking to be the reason for people from around the world to visit here, though we wouldn't and don't shy from that role when it is pressed upon us. Instead, as an urban university our objective is to contribute to making and sustaining this region as a place that works environmentally, politically, socially, creatively, and economically. When this region is visited for those reasons, and as visitors poke around, they should find the fingerprints of the university and its many partners on the successes drawing visitors and recognition. Then, and only then, will the promise of the urban university be realized.

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