

The Public University and Cities: The Case of the University of Connecticut

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The engagement of the intellectual life of the university with broader society is complex and ever-changing. The first universities in medieval Europe were often located within walls, representing both a literal and metaphorical disengagement of intellectuals from the society around them.² American public universities, many founded in the mid- to late 19th century as land-grant colleges, represent an alternative model of higher education that blurs the historical separation between "town and gown" by vastly expanding access to higher education and focusing on emerging social challenges.³

As public assets, the advantages of public universities are well known. Universities, which host faculties of accomplished researchers and aspiring, motivated students preparing for lifetime careers, foster the pursuit of basic knowledge and human capital development in ways that greatly benefit broader society. External forces and social changes, however, were often required to extend these benefits to historically marginalized and minority populations. This essay explores the evolution of the American public university in the context of an increasingly urbanizing United States. Thereafter, the case of the University of Connecticut (UConn) will be discussed, concluding with its relevancy to contemporary urban life and public engagement.

The Public University and the American City

State government-supported colleges made up a very small percentage of American higher education institutions until the mid-19th century. Efforts of state governments in higher education were reinforced when the federal government chose to engage in encouraging higher education opportunities for young Americans facing changing labor markets.⁴ Beginning with the Morrill Act of 1862, Congress passed a series of laws that established the American land-grant university system, a unique federal-state government collaboration that offered an alternative to traditional liberal arts colleges and, in later years, the German-inspired research universities that emerged in the late 19th century.⁵

These federally supported land-grant institutions were originally designed to foster a predominately rural, agricultural economy and society; they promoted teaching priorities in agriculture and "mechanic arts" like mechanical and civil engineering and established agricultural research priorities and outreach missions to convey knowledge and best practices to rural societies.⁶ The public university, including land-grant and other state-supported

universities, significantly transformed the landscape of American higher education by opening higher education to non-elites.⁷

By the end of the 19th century, industrialization and urbanization had become key elements of the demographic expansion of the United States. The 1920 U.S. Census reported that, for the first time in the nation's history, over half of America's population resided in urban areas. In response, land-grant universities began to extend their rural-oriented mission to the needs of a rapidly urbanizing society, as evidenced by the diversification of their curricula to include liberal arts studies, basic scientific research, and professional training in a range of fields including social work, public and business administration, law, communications, public health, pharmacy, education, and city planning. By following this increasingly expansive development track, many of the original 19th-century land-grant institutions – including the University of Connecticut – evolved into their respective states' flagship public institutions.

After facilitating the creation of the land-grant university system in the mid-19th century, federal influence in American higher education waned for several decades, only to re-emerge after World War II when various laws, court decisions, and funding decisions democratized college access and helped shape national research. Federal efforts dramatically increased both the overall size and diversity of student bodies at public universities – including the original land-grant institutions and other state-supported universities – throughout the country, most notably due to the 1944 G.I. Bill, which enabled thousands of veterans to attend college. Initially, however, veterans belonging to racial and ethnic minorities lacked equal access; mid-century civil rights legislation and federal court decisions would finally mandate full access and better on-campus conditions for women and minorities. While several European immigrant groups had struggled to gain access to higher education around the turn of the 20th century, by the 1960s the demographic composition of student bodies diversified substantially, albeit slowly, as total enrollments increased.

The second form of major federal influence on higher education in the 20th century stemmed from a shift in national research priorities as the United States entered the Cold War.⁸ The U.S. government's heightened focus on defense, aerospace, and medical research sectors translated to increased funding opportunities in higher education, especially in STEM-related fields. As a result, scholarly research and original contributions to knowledge became critically important in assessing university quality, becoming a foundational metric in the Carnegie Classification system of higher education institutions (established in 1970). In 2018, of the 131 universities classified as "R1: Research Universities (Highest Research Activity)," ninety-four were public universities.⁹

The research agendas of public universities were also increasingly affected by needs and priorities of the communities in which they were located. As these communities became more urban and industrialized over the course of the late 19th and 20th centuries, public universities' curricula, research foci, and Extension efforts evolved to meet these changing social conditions.¹⁰ Later in the 20th century, as many northern cities entered a post-industrial period of economic, social, and environmental decline, policy leaders explored ways to utilize public

universities to address these distinctly urban challenges. Encouraged by such groups as the National Urban Extension Leaders,¹¹ some institutions began explicitly substituting the word “urban” for the older, agriculturally-focused terminology, referencing “urban-grant universities,” “urban observatories,” and “urban field laboratories.”¹² New urban-focused research paradigms emerged, including “community-based” and “action-oriented” ones that used specific social and environmental circumstances to help shape research agendas and to improve local conditions.¹³ In a parallel development, research outcomes in scientific and technological fields were assessed for commercialization potential and even as seedbeds for new firm development.¹⁴ Universities physically located in cities came to be identified as “anchor institutions” due to their long-term impacts on local built environments and city economies¹⁵ and their status as potential partners in local redevelopment efforts.¹⁶

During the first two decades of the 21st century, public universities have increasingly adopted interdisciplinary research frameworks to address transitions to more sustainable, equitable, and global cities. One framework studies the complex interactions of ecological and land use systems and human well-being in cities.¹⁷ Another encourages technological innovation in urban infrastructure systems to improve resource utilization – the so-called “smart cities” agenda. In addition, globalization trends have forced a reconceptualization of cities in the broader global context.¹⁸ The effects of increased flows of trade, investment, population, culture, knowledge, and ideas across national borders are reshaping cities in ways that are not yet fully understood. These exciting new research agendas, by virtue of their complexity, require the use of transdisciplinary frameworks, drawing upon multiple disciplines.

Despite an inherent resistance to change and being hampered by inward-looking disciplines, American public universities have, over the last century and a half, evolved in response to societal change, local challenges, and national priorities. These institutions, however, have recently witnessed significant constraints, if not reductions, in state funding¹⁹ along with relative stagnation in federally funded R&D since 2014,²⁰ forcing diversification in funding sources and placing stress on their research capacity. Although their missions and agendas have been, and will be, necessarily shaped by levels and sources of funding, public universities ultimately remain accountable to political constituencies for their programs and performance. Universities have the remarkable ability to reconfigure collaboration among disciplines and use transdisciplinary approaches to meet emerging areas of inquiry and adapt to the needs of the society in which they are embedded; they will doubtlessly continue to adapt to the new reality of decreased governmental support as well.

The University of Connecticut: An Engaged Public University

The development of the University of Connecticut (UConn), from its origins as the Storrs Agricultural School (SAS) in 1881 through its ascension to New England’s premier public research university in the early 21st century, has closely followed the national trend of land-grant institutions, albeit with some unique features.²¹ By 1881, Connecticut was one of the most industrialized states in the nation, having been one of the pioneering leaders of the

American Industrial Revolution.²² Like other land-grant colleges, the SAS was founded to provide a publicly accessible pathway to higher education that focused on bolstering the region's agricultural sector, which many feared was being threatened by rapid industrialization. In just a few decades, however, the SAS had dramatically increased in size and scope several times – always in response to the perceived needs of the community around it – and, by 1939, the rural school had become the University of Connecticut, an institution that encompassed a wide diversity of science and liberal arts disciplines and a raft of professional schools. This section will review forces that helped shape today's UConn.

Change and growth at UConn were often met with resistance from some political leaders and state residents who thought that Connecticut was being well served by many other higher education institutions in the region. As UConn improved its national standing during the 1930s and 1940s, some viewed the institution as becoming ever more elitist and straying from its land-grant origins, even though UConn's changes were almost always responses to state-specific needs. But at several crucial moments – including library expansions in the 1930s and 1950s, the institutionalization of programs in social work, pharmacy, medicine, dentistry, law and business,²³ the modernization of its physical plant, and increased research support in the early 21st century – UConn's potential value was recognized and supported by Connecticut's political leaders.²⁴

The expansion of access to higher education became an ever-higher priority in the second half of the 20th century as a premium was increasingly placed on skills and education in the national labor market. The Storrs Agricultural School was ahead of the national co-ed curve, having admitted female students in 1891, just ten years after its founding.²⁵ Following World War II, the massive influx of G.I. Bill veterans more than doubled the student population and spurred construction projects that define the layout and character of the Storrs campus to this day.²⁶ While the first African American student attended UConn in 1914, it would not be until much later, in response to the civil rights movement and federal legislation, that UConn substantially extended access to racial and ethnic minorities.²⁷ Recognizing the importance of the core teaching mission of universities – preparing undergraduates for life-long learning and citizenship and for professional careers, and training new generations of scholars – the state of Connecticut and local governments supported the expansion of enrollments and diversity in student bodies at public institutions like UConn and other state and community colleges by the start of the 21st century.

UConn's effort to expand educational access found an urban focus in its regional campuses, located in Waterbury, Stamford, West Hartford, and Avery Point. The downtown relocation of the Stamford (1998) and Hartford (2017) campuses supported teaching programs oriented, in part, toward issues specific to those two cities. In a similar vein, even though not located in an urban setting, the Avery Point campus conducts research and outreach on climate change's impact on coastal communities as part of UConn's Sea Grant activities.²⁸

Many of UConn's 20th-century public engagement efforts involved urban-related activities. Its Cooperative Extension activities adapted programs and created new ones, like CLEAR (Center for Land Use, Education, and Research), to reflect urban issues in the state.²⁹ The Institute for Urban Research was created in 1963 in the School of Business Administration. Accompanying developments in UConn's academic programs in public affairs, the name evolved to the Institute of Public and Urban Affairs in 1987, then to the Institute of Public Affairs in 2001, and was eventually incorporated into the Department of Public Policy in 2004. In addition, new forms of engagement emerged, including UConn's Community Involvement Program in the 1960s, which provided leaves of absence to faculty members engaged in improving community programs and in changing attitudes toward human rights.³⁰ The outstanding Education Abroad and Urban Semester programs and Service Learning opportunities for students and faculty members continue a tradition of student learning through exposure to and experience in non-familiar settings. Cities provide a rich learning environment, sparking curiosity and critical thinking among students about prevailing social practices.³¹ In an acknowledgement of the durability and saliency of this concept, the Carnegie Commission introduced the Community Engagement classification in 2006 to recognize exceptional outreach practices among universities, a classification held by UConn between 2010 and 2018.

Urban areas hold many advantages for a publicly oriented institution like UConn. Spheres of social creativity – ranging from arts and culture to community initiatives to science and technology – as well as a growing share of the world's wealth generation processes are increasingly located in metropolitan areas. Diversified urban economies with high levels of human capital are especially well positioned for future growth. Globally, the United Nations reported that just over one-half of the world's population resides in cities,³² and it forecasts an increase to 70 percent by 2050.³³ In the developed world, the average rate is 75 to 80 percent. Connecticut is the state with the eleventh highest percentage of its population living in urban areas, at 88 percent. Composed of 169 small cities, sprawling suburbs, and towns shaped by riverine and coastal waterways, its particularly distinct urbanization pattern results in a curious mix of pastoral and forested scenes located alongside deindustrialized urban corridors. Connecticut's unique urban landscape, as well as its proximity to the large cities of New York and Boston, makes UConn an ideal home for innovative interdisciplinary urban research and community outreach.³⁴

Cities are not without their own unique challenges, however; they must support their economies to compete in the global marketplace but also provide residents with opportunities and services that enhance their well-being. While municipalities strive to offer a high quality of life in order to attract the highly skilled, professional labor – the so-called “creative class” – desired by many of the most promising economic sectors, they must simultaneously grapple with very complicated issues of human capital development, health, public safety, affordable housing, social exclusion, and neighborhood stability, as observed in Connecticut's larger cities. Equity issues in cities (especially for residents from marginalized backgrounds and immigrant communities) and avenues for intergenerational mobility require inclusive economic development. Universities, as crucial drivers of the knowledge economy, harbor incredible

potential for promoting the kind of technological and economic development that 21st century cities need. As city leaders search for innovative approaches to promote development and prosperity for their populations, urban-facing universities, including UConn, are increasingly responding to their calls for action.

Today, among the many potential public purposes of higher education, UConn's resources should align to help address the complex contemporary challenges in cities and towns. UConn has a rich history of responding to urban-related challenges in the state by integrating new disciplines and adopting interdisciplinary approaches while achieving its educational mission, thereby showing the value of an engaged university in addressing social challenges. These responses will contribute to the further development of UConn, especially toward excellence in research, teaching, and engagement consistent with maintaining the high standards of a public, Tier I research university.

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³ Clark Kerr, *Uses of the University* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963).

⁴ Via the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, Hatch Act of 1887, and Smith-Lever Act of 1914.

⁵ Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: Metropolitan Experience, 1876-1980* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

⁶ The university outreach mission is associated with the Extension Movement. The federal role in extensions was established in the Smith-Lever Act of 1914. Nancy H. Bull, Anne H. Rideout, and Nancy P. Weiss, *Education in Action: A Story of Commitment, Challenge, and Change: Connecticut Cooperative Extension System, University of Connecticut 1960-2008* (Storrs, CT: University of Connecticut College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, 2011), xix-xx.

⁷ Steven J. Diner, "The Land-Grant Analogy and the American Urban University: An Historical Analysis," *Metropolitan Universities*, 23, no. 3 (2013), 61-77.

⁸ Kerr, *Uses of the University*, Chapter 2 *passim*.

⁹ The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, "Definitions and Methods," <http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/definitions.php>, n.d. Their distribution of doctoral universities of very high ranking research activity can be downloaded at <http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/downloads.php>.

¹⁰ Bull, et. al., *Education in Action*, xix-xx.

¹¹ National Urban Extension Leaders website, <https://www.nuelaction.org>

¹² Diner, "The Land-Grant Analogy and the American Urban University: An Historical Analysis," 61-77.

¹³ Donald Schon, "The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action," *Metropolitan Universities* Special Issue (December 2018).

¹⁴ Mary Donegan, "Bridging Commercialization and Redevelopment: Jurisdictions and University Policy Development," *Urban Studies* 56, no. 3 (February 2019), 1768-1785.

¹⁵ Coalition for Urban Servicing Universities, "Urban Universities: Anchor Institutions Generating Prosperity for America's Cities," http://usucoalition.org/documents/USU_White_Paper_Report_2010.pdf, n.d.

¹⁶ Max Stephenson, Jr., "Conceiving Land Grant University Community Engagement as Adaptive Leadership," *Higher Education: The International Journal of Higher Education and Educational Planning* 61, no. 1 (2011), 95-108.

¹⁷ Advisory Committee on Environmental Research and Education, *Sustainable Urban Systems: Articulating a Long-Term Convergence Research Agenda* (Washington DC: Office of Integrative Activities, National Science Foundation, 2018). <https://www.nsf.gov/ere/ereweb/ac-ere/sustainable-urban-systems.pdf>

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- ¹⁸ UN Habitat, Cities 2030, *Cities for All: Implementing the New Urban Agenda* (2017). <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/wuf9.html>
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- ²⁰ Federal funding of university research increased steadily during the 1990s (in real terms), but has been relatively flat thereafter at around \$40 billion during most of the 21st century. American Association for the Advancement of Science, et. al, <https://www.aaas.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/UniSource1.jpg> (2018).
- ²¹ Bruce M. Stave et al., *Red Brick in the Land of Steady Habits: Creating the University of Connecticut, 1881-2006* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2006).
- ²² Eric S. Hintz, "Hartford (Late 1800s): Factory Town Puts the Pieces Together in Explosive New Ways," in Arthur P. Molella and Anna Karvellas (eds.), *Places of Inventions* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2015).
- ²³ The School of Business was created, in part, as UConn's response to the Great Depression and the need for economic growth. Robert E. Hoskin, *History of the University of Connecticut School of Business Administration* (Indianapolis: Dog Ear Publishing, 2015).
- ²⁴ Research support initiatives in recent decades include UConn 2000 (1995), 21st Century UConn (2002), and Next Generation Connecticut (2014).
- ²⁵ Stave, *Red Brick in the Land of Steady Habits*, 6.
- ²⁶ Stave, *Red Brick in the Land of Steady Habits*, 65-67.
- ²⁷ Stave, *Red Brick in the Land of Steady Habits*, 67-73.
- ²⁸ Activities conducted under the Connecticut Sea Grant can be found at <https://seagrant.uconn.edu>.
- ²⁹ Bull, et. al., *Education in Action*, 156-157.
- ³⁰ Stave, *Red Brick in the Land of Steady Habits*, 148.
- ³¹ *Metropolitan Universities Journal* (August 2018). Special Issue: Transformative Learning
- ³² UN Habitat, *State of the World's Cities 2012/13: Prosperity of Cities* (2013). <http://mirror.unhabitat.org/pmss/listItemDetails.aspx?publicationID=3387>
- ³³ UN Habitat, Cities 2030, *Cities for All: Implementing the New Urban Agenda* (2017). <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/wuf9.html>
- ³⁴ United States 2010 Census, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural/2010-urban-rural.html>, retrieved May 31, 2019; Lidia Ryan, "How Urban is Connecticut?," *CT Post* (June 20, 2016), <https://www.ctpost.com/living/article/How-urban-is-Connecticut-8312996.php>.



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