



101 Constitution Avenue, NW, Suite 600 West ♦ Washington, DC 20001

**Strengthening Communities:  
Community Capacity-Building and Advisory Roles for Anchor Institutions in  
Neighborhood Development**

**Introduction**

In 1914, the Smith-Lever Act established the third component of America's historic land-grant mission in teaching, research, and service. Known as cooperative extension, the legislation mandated universities to translate their scientific know-how into practical uses for ordinary people. Funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the program became the major thrust of service for higher education in the 20th Century. At a time when 3 out of 4 people lived on a farm, university service, or "outreach," was both advanced and relevant – a new technology to increase crop yields, or research-based education on animal husbandry. Through the cooperative network of largely rural land-grant universities, the government could also respond en masse to national needs - whether that was increasing food production during World War I, or managing the Farm Seed and Loan Program during the Depression. In all these efforts, higher education's role was paramount.

As America has jettisoned into the 21st Century, higher education is now tasked with defining a mode of "service" that makes sense for cities. Unlike our rural counterparts, the needs of urban communities are not monolithic, confined to a single field, nor are universities poised to unilaterally identify and address urban problems. That the challenge is complex does not mean that universities should pull back from this crucial mission. Now more than ever, universities are needed to reinvigorate their accountability to communities and, as invoked in the Kellogg Commission Report, "to drive urban revitalization and community renewal comparable in its own way to our rural development efforts in the last century."

**The Problem**

While the world and our national economy has shifted dramatically – nearly 86% of our population now lives in cities – higher education has been slow to turn its attention to the needs of Urban America. At the same time, our cities face perplexing dilemmas that could certainly benefit from collaboration and fresh ideas – whether that's containing crime, integrating new influxes of immigrants, or creating more green space and transportation alternatives. In every one of these areas, research universities can be a vital resource for community organizations and leaders. Yet, up until recently, the efforts to link new technologies and research to these "softer" community needs were largely ad-

hoc and piecemeal across an institution, motivated mostly by individual faculty. It was also, for the most part, a one-way street. While researchers went into the community, the urban civic leader or organization could not count on, nor easily navigate, the university bureaucracy to access the support they need.

There are promising signs that higher education – propelled by the city-based presidential leadership – is beginning to respond. Urban public research universities, over the past decade, are increasingly viewing themselves as anchor institutions within cities – sharing a mutual destiny and accountable to a new set of rules for engagement. The high tech and science capability within these universities have necessarily placed them at the center of many regional economic development planning efforts. These aspects of university engagement are covered in the two précis entitled “**University Impact on Regional Economic Development in Urban Settings**” and “**Criteria for Measuring University Impact on Neighborhood Development.**” Another area which is of interest to the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities is how universities are using their research and expertise to support and build capacity of urban leaders and entities, and the “interface” by which effective collaborations are made possible.

### **The Solution**

Among the 35 plus members of the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities, new models are being developed to streamline research resources and expertise, particularly for use in urban development and urban problem solving. These efforts – from the new Urban Solutions Center in Louisville to the Center for the City in Cincinnati or the Great Cities Institute in Chicago - are designed to provide one-stop shopping for civic leaders and city entities that want to access university resources or partner in collaborative ventures. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century urban equivalent of agricultural extension, these centers provide assistance on topics as divergent as smart growth and sewer systems, serve as a repository for data on neighborhood and city economic development efforts, and offer continuing education for civic and government leaders.

### **The Implementation**

The USU proposes to catalogue and evaluate these efforts among its 35 plus member urban institutions. The effort would be spearheaded by the existing Strengthening Communities Executive Committee and the individual representatives at each institution appointed by Presidents/Chancellors. The outcome would be a set of recommendations for university leadership and policy makers with regard to university capacity-building and advisory roles in urban communities. It would also provide valuable “how to” lessons for university presidents that need to prioritize resources and may be weary of efforts, particularly in engagement, for which the impact is difficult to quantify. Toward that end, the report will recommend metrics for universities to track their progress in their capacity-building or advisory efforts. On a national level, it will further the dialogue regarding urban engagement, and push the envelope as to what is truly possible and expected of higher education in serving the needs of America’s cities.