One University's Urban Commitment

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Universities are constantly being challenged to come down out of their ivory towers, update their offerings, and adapt their mission to more effectively meet the needs of their community. Ongoing universities, in general, find this difficult to do. Here's an example of how one campus is addressing itself to meet today's concerns as an "urban university." Implications can be drawn and applied to Extension . . . don't you agree?

Four years of intensive discussions and conferences at Texas Southern University have resulted in our designating TSU as an "urban university." This means that everything we do, everything we project, all that we anticipate is to be evaluated in terms of what any given consideration offers toward the resolution of present problems in the urban community, and the avoidance of more complex issues in the future.

This must not be a superficial pronouncement, nor an on-and-off commitment. It must be a total address of our best and most creative intelligence, for the process of urbanization isn't just irreversible—it points in a direction that we can now perceive as threatening to our survival.

Arnold Toynbee, the world renowned historian, equates the entire population explosion with an "urban explosion." He recognizes that, "The population of the cities is growing at an even faster rate than the population of the world."[1] Groups of cities are melding into regional urban clusters, which in turn are growing toward other urban clusters.

> . . . the northeastern seaboard megalopolis and a Great Lakes megalopolis are already stretching out tentacles toward each other, and the tips of these tentacles are beginning to intertwine.[2]

Thus, the ultimate meeting of the Detroit, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh cluster and the Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, D.C. cluster will almost certainly form Toynbee's *Encumenopo-*

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lis before the turn of the century, less than 30 years from now. If you've driven recently from Houston to Galveston, or to Huntsville, or to Victoria, you'll see the "megalopolic" process in motion before your very eyes. Indeed a "world city" is in the making.

Toynbee continues:

> If the World City is allowed to come into being haphazardly, the whole of the world's additional population, together with the increasing portion of the world's present rural population that is abandoning the countryside, is going to split up into urban slums.[3]

You need not be gifted to see these possibilities all around us. They're in every expression of the new technology that has given us nuclear power, worldwide communications, and space exploration. So, *our commitment to the urban crisis isn't a commitment to just immediate manifestations of urbanization, but also to the larger process of human adaptation to the impersonalization of a world city.* In more precise terms, what are we talking about? Several things.

Priorities Versus Needs

We're talking about doing more to affect directly the quality of life for those citizens of the inner city as we presently define the physical community. In the words of Bernard Weissbourd:

> Those most affected by hunger, lack of health services, unemployment, poor education, and housing shortages are the black and the poor—and their neighbors.[4]

This must first get through to every member of the TSU family: *the urban concern is demonstrated concern for the black and the poor —and their neighbors.* We wouldn't have you neglect the rigorous demands of the academic life—to do so would not be consistent with our commitment to a people's destiny and to a world destiny. But all of our studies must address themselves in a significant part to the urban condition of those in the inner city whose welfare is more than a small determinant of the future of the world city and, therefore, the future of this planet.

Alex Gerber of the University of Southern California Medical School wrote an extremely articulate piece in which he pointed out the causal relationship between poverty and ill health—both physical and mental. He views the high incidence of ill health among the poor to be the direct result of their poverty, a symptom of deeper social conditions he calls the "culture of poverty." Were the poverty stricken

> . . . to benefit from the most expert medical attention . . . the poor would remain unhealthy, contending daily with rat-infested, garbage strewn slums, vicious crime on the streets . . . high unemployment rates and inferior education. These are the environmental agonies that ravage the poor, and they will remain sick

until they extricate themselves from the socioeconomic morass in which they are so deeply mired.[5]

Two points must be made at once: first, the poor can't extricate themselves. They must be extricated by those who have the intellectual, political, and economic means to do so. Further, if sustained poverty causes ill health even in the presence of expert medical service, it can and does present extremely difficult and complex learning problems in the same company with scholars and scientists.

How can we expect the poverty-stricken youngster of the inner city to assimilate abstract knowledge when the world as given to him requires that he must fight for his daily bread? How can we expect the functionally illiterate adult to appreciate the subtleties of history and philosophy when he has no defense against the daily pressures of survival in a highly literate society? How can we expect the chronically deprived even to believe that education is worthwhile, when the "educated" realtor or businessman uses his "education" to drive the urban poor further into a state of helplessness and despair?

The pervasiveness of poverty is so all-consuming that Gerber refers to it as ". . . America's most common and serious disease."[6] It's most certainly one of the most complex maladies that invades our classroom. And we can't be true to our commitment to the urban community if we aren't creatively alert to the special demands that poverty places on its host who presents himself to the discipline of academic studies.

Rarely is it true that a student can't learn, more often than not we simply haven't found the way to teach him. The scientific approach of the middle-class teacher leaves too much out of the formula, the intuitive approach of those recently from the ghetto might include too much, take too much for granted; both often miss the target by conforming more to external priorities rather than to the needs of the recipient.

This appears to be a common attitude among those with power. Be it intellectual power as in a classroom, economic power as between the rich and the poor, or political power as between two groups. The basic character of contemporary relationships seems to be more in line with what has been set forth as a priority by and for the possessor, rather than what has been demonstrated as the needs of the receiver.

Thus, we must deal with the federal government, which establishes a program for the poor for a fixed period as the Model Cities Program for five years. Who set the time limit? Certainly not the residents of the target areas. Recent debate in Congress on revenue sharing centered on the issue of whether it would be a program for two years or five years. Who knows how long it will take to extricate the poverty stricken from their abyss of hopelessness? Dare a government official claim such wisdom?

Paradoxically, we pour out massive funds to perpetuate a grievous war 10,000 miles away with nary an eye to the impact on the receivers of our dubious generosity. Then we withhold minimal funds from the suffering ones "down the street," again with little or no vision of how the would-be receivers are faring. In both instances, the motivation is a priority set by the least affected.

In rather precise terms, when we advance a commitment to the urban community, we're binding ourselves and obligating our resources to bring measured relief to the people of the city, specifically the black and the poor and their neighbors, whatever their race or condition. And the techniques, procedures, and processes we use must be in synchrony with their needs and not alone with our own priorities. Moreover, we must insist that all other institutions that profess a social responsibility to the urban community will similarly interpret their commitment.

Obsolescence Versus Creativity

When we commit ourselves and our institutions to the urban community, we're pledging ourselves to the creative application of traditional functions and orthodox procedures. As contradictory as that might sound, this must be done. To continue in the tradition of orthodoxy at the exclusion of present considerations is suicidal, and that appears to be the character of much that we continue to do.

It's absolutely necessary that we look back on the past with a sense of history to garner strength from our successes and those of our predecessors. It's even more important, however, that we carefully note those cultural traits that we will *not* bring into the present.

The recurring fault among us educators is that frequently we're overly committed to passing on a *corpus* of ideas in our instructional programs, without adequately screening out those ideas that should be separated from the *corpus*—those that offer little use in a highly sophisticated, urban, futuristic society.

For me the best gauge of the "dinosaur-oriented" professor is what he talks about. It only takes a few minutes of conversation to determine if a professor, given full freedom, would design a course in predetermining sex in the unborn diplodocus, or if he would involve his students in designing a course in personal attributes for the optimal urban life.

Here at TSU, I have some of the most personable associates among the faculty; they're absolutely charming. But some are presenting the same issues, saying the same things, even using the same jokes to illustrate points long without relevance or importance. There are procedures and practices that would be perpetrated by some of these faculty that were obsolete even in the 19th century. A few seem so bent on keeping us in their dinosaur world that they phantasize rather than teach, And, I imagine they preceive a student as

a baby Brontosaurus to be nurtured on a dinosaurian diet of obsolescence.

This isn't just true of some of our faculty, such regressive traits are to be found wherever educators assemble—from the halls of the most prestigious universities to the parking lots of the newest two-year college. And not only among educators, but among human beings generally. Most of man's institutions are monuments to mediocrity, minutiae, and moments long past. It's just so obvious when this is true of us whose job is to guide the education of the young.

Passing on a *corpus* of ideas is our reason for being, but woe on us who would pass on ideas and traits with a blind eye of imitation, oblivious to the demands of an era that has no precedence in world history. Again, from the perception of Toynbee, it's the continuation of past cultural traits into new situations that has led to the collapse of cultures in the past. And from the philosopher Santayana: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."[7]

Our commitment to urban development requires a courageous break from those traditions that would constrain us, and a bold imaginative leap into first, the present, then the most promising future that has ever been possible for mankind.

Ambivalence Versus Integrity

Our commitment to urban development means, further, that we'll cease to be ambiguous in our thoughts and ambivalent in our feelings toward the larger community. Ambiguity and ambivalence are inherently a part of the minority experience—particularly the black experience.

The "place" of the black man pre-1960 in the American society wasn't clear except that his "place" was a "no-place." He was called on to develop an ethic in ambiguity *a la* Simone de Beauvoir, which in turn required that he "love" everything and everybody, which probably accounts for the perpetual grin of a generation ago.

The generalized grin, the "eternal happiness," has given way to the freedom to disagree and to express displeasure. It's possible, however, that hostility—like the grin—could become so indiscriminate that we overlook the real specific possibilities for lifting our age and ourselves from a morass which, I reiterate, we singularly have a spiritual power as a group to do.

Let me add quickly that I don't subscribe to the shallowness and the hypocrisy in the dichotomous "love it or leave it." I don't advocate an acceptance of the larger community in toto. I do advocate full acceptance of the *concept* of a *single community* whose overall integrity is the common concern of every one of its citizens—white, black, or otherwise. Especially black.

Within the concept of a total community, it's possible then for each group, however it may define itself, to achieve a real measure of

identity and realization of group goals. There must be a commitment to Houston, for example. Then, we can be selective about the institutions and processes of the city to which we'll lend our support, both as individuals and as groups of individuals. We can likewise be specific about what we won't support, and what we would forthrightly oppose.

Four Specific Areas

We separate our mission from that of the grade schools in many ways. The primary difference, however, is that we are obligated by designation to the preparation of leadership—mainly minority leadership for the urban community.

Thus, the basic skills of communication and citizenship as conveyed by the grade school are honed by a professional faculty of the university into a leadership competence intended to be fit for the complex issues of urban life. In this essential regard, we can't include some areas of community life and ignore others. We can't avoid the sensitive areas and stress leadership development in only those enterprises that afford us maximum emotional and psychological security and social acceptability.

"New" Politics

We seem to have entered into an era when litigation has become antagonizing, and unreliable as a means of securing human rights. The public overreaction to bussing legislation and pending congressional ac-

tion on House Bill No. 13915 are two prime examples of the change. This legislation would provide bases for opening up hundreds of court cases that have long since settled various desegregation issues. This much is inescapable: we must prepare our young people for leadership in a newly developing political spectrum, or we shall be preparing them for a "yesterday that can't become tomorrow."

Law Enforcement

Further, the ravages of crime against person and property continue to focus on the minority community, although the FBI Uniform Crime Reports–1971 point out the rapid increase of crime in the suburbs. The mayor of Philadelphia, a former police chief, has been reported as acknowledging the generalized incidence of crime in the inner city and suburbs of that city. He reasons well that lawlessness allowed to flourish in one sector of the community is certain to multiply itself wherever residents of the city may gravitate.

It's absolutely naive to assume that Houston can continue to grow without attracting more than its share of the lawless elements. And to the mugger on the street, the professor, welfare check recipient, the smartly dressed business man, and the society matron are all the same. Each is a prime subject for the mugger's special brand of violence.

Through our Urban Resources Center, we must find avenues of cooperation with the city administra-

tion and other resources in the community to see that only the best prepared men that Houston can afford are given the custody of the precious lives of the black and the poor and their neighbors—wherever they reside in the city. This is only a logical extension of our involvement in drug abuse education, venereal disease control, and other maladies of the urban community. Increases of crime against persons and property are too general to avoid and too deadly to ignore.

Slum Clearance

The physical condition of our community must not escape our attention. I speak now of garbage-filled sidewalks, stagnant water in drainage ditches, automobile wrecks that clog narrow streets, dangerously run-down buildings standing vacant. Tradition has it that the city provides the services to correct such conditions, and I don't hold the city blameless where these conditions exist.

But again, my logic dictates that delivery of community services, adequate to urban areas a thousand-fold larger in only a matter of short years, requires some creative applications of traditional ways of doing things. Block by block in selected areas, we must transfer the responsibility for the physical appearance of the city to the residents, perhaps under some sort of contractual arrangement with the city and/or the property owners.

Unduly neglected or abandoned property of the inner city that has been amortized many times over by exorbitant rent, should be deeded over to the residents; for it's their home, the only home that many have ever known, and many have paid for the right of ownership. The pride of ownership, along with an innovative educational program through such projects as home repair in the School of Technology, should result in important changes in our city in the quickest possible time.

Educational Innovation

Finally, we speak of innovation in education. There's a large number of young adults between 25 and 30 who for various reasons weren't able to pursue studies beyond high school. We hope that the extended day of classes into the evening at TSU will make it possible for many of them to enrich themselves and their job potential.

Let's not forget that democracy is for an educated people. And to the extent that significant segments of the citizenry are either not educated or poorly educated, to that same extent at least, the fulfillment of the goals of a national democracy won't be realized.

We're also preparing an important option for these young people and others who must work full time to meet family obligations. We're planning an experiment with a weekend college program. Hopefully, it will soon be possible for the highly motivated person to take a full academic load of 12–15 hours on the weekend: 3 classes on Friday

and 1 each on Saturday and Sunday. Other arrangements will be possible. Given indications of sufficient interest, we'll begin a pilot program in the spring semester.

This idea and others in this article represent only the beginning of preparation for the new era that is on us, but to which we're only the outriders. The young people of the city are the true leaders for this new day. And it's to you, the young, that we're dedicated.

Marvin Gaye summarizes most eloquently and melodiously in his successful recording of "Inner City Blues" all that we can say about the urban area. After lamenting the woes of the city he concludes, "God knows where we're headed." Let's try to find out from Him, and give Him a little help in getting us where He wants us to go.

Footnotes

1. Arnold Toynbee, "Patterns and Predictions: Creating a Better Way of Life for Cities," *The American Way*, VIII (August 5, 1972), 21.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. Bernard Weissbourd, "Satellite Communities," *The Center Magazine* (January-February, 1972), p. 7.
5. Alex Gerber, "Most Serious Disease Is Poverty," *The Houston Chronicle*, August 20, 1972.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*