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Recommended Citation

Vaughan, Geoffrey M. "Town and Gown: What Great Cities Can Teach Higher Education." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 20, 2014). <https://www.chronicle.com/article/TownGown-What-Great/149511>.

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ADVICE

Town and Gown: What Great Cities Can Teach Higher Education

If colleges are going to survive the 21st century, they must not make the mistakes that cities made in the 20th



Stuart Bradford for The Chronicle

By Geoffrey M. Vaughan | OCTOBER 20, 2014

Cities and colleges are more alike than people think. Both are considered economic engines that also offer rites of passage and an escape from parochialism. Both host sports teams and their own police forces. Recently the overwhelming debts run up by cities and by students have forced themselves on the public's attention. Yet despite the significant woes of Detroit and the impending bankruptcies of other American cities, no one is expecting urban living to disappear or be radically transformed. Higher education, however, is not so lucky.

Some doomsayers predict the rise of a completely online educational system, spurred by the spread of massive open online courses. Telecommuting did not destroy cities, but many fear it will do so to colleges.

In the 1970s, some critics thought that cities were finished. There was nothing you could get in a city that could not be found in a suburb, at least nothing you would want. With the advent of telecommuting in the 90s, even Bill Gates championed a new exurban existence. Home offices would replace office buildings just as shopping malls replaced downtown department stores.

That has not happened. Yes, Detroit may be at death's door, but that is largely a specific incident of mismanagement by politicians, auto executives, and union leaders. The city's stunning depopulation, down 25 percent in the past decade, is an anomaly. Urban life is booming, and we have reached the point at which half the world's population is urbanized. In the United States, every region has increased its level of urbanization over the past 50 years, with the most recent census putting the national level at just over 80 percent. Whatever may happen to Detroit and its unfortunate citizens, the city as an idea is healthy; higher education does not seem to be.

What do cities do? We are mistaken when we think of them merely as structures for delivering public services. Rather, we should look at them as the dense social networks that the Harvard economist Edward Glaeser detailed in *Triumph of the City*. They make possible what Lewis Mumford called in 1937 "the social drama that comes into existence through the focusing and intensification of group activity." The concrete canyons of New York are thrilling because they hold and then funnel together millions of people.

From early Mesopotamia to Boston, cities have worked because they concentrate people in a small area, unleashing a remarkable intellectual potential that is otherwise inaccessible when dispersed over a large landmass. Yet there is more to the success of cities than an economy of scale. According to Glaeser, "Cities enable collaboration, especially the joint production of knowledge that is mankind's most important creation." Yet too many have been distracted from that goal. As a result, eager efforts to reform cities left swaths of destruction behind them.

No city is now proud of the freeways that cut across it or the housing projects that blight it. Boston has buried the freeway it once thought would save it. Its agonizing experience may mean that no other city will ever try such a massive correction again, no matter how appreciated the change. (Although Seattle, at the opposite end of the I-90, is engaged in a similar, and similarly fraught, endeavor.)

If colleges and universities are going to survive the 21st century, however, they must not make the mistakes that cities made in the 20th.

Colleges are at their best when they focus and intensify the intellectual drama that they uniquely provide. We should feel sorry for the person who has never had an experience in which, for at least a moment, the whole world seemed to make sense around one intellectual achievement. For most of us, this probably happened first, or most often, in college. But it is unlikely to happen at all when that intellectual drama is given a small and shrinking stage.

Recent studies of student engagement reveal that less and less time is devoted to studying, and more and more to entertainment. The 2013 National Survey of Student Engagement found that freshmen spent an average of 14 hours a week on schoolwork. Even if you believe that a three-credit course represents three hours in the classroom each week (it is more like two hours), and assume that students are taking five three-credit courses a semester, that means students are spending only about 29 hours a week on their education. A Bureau of Labor Statistics survey of how college students spend their weekdays found that on average, from 2009 to 2013, students spent 2.5 hours of their day on paid work, 3.3 hours on educational activities, and 4.0 hours—second only to sleeping—on "leisure and sports."

Should we blame students for the party atmosphere on many campuses? That might be tempting, but it ignores the "Club Ed" ambitions of some presidents. Dorms, in many cases, have become full-scale resorts. What is a student to think when seeing, for instance, Texas Tech University's leisure pool and "lazy river"?

A recent survey from the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association found that there are nearly 160 leisure-and-recreation projects under way on campuses, representing an investment of some \$1.7-billion. Perhaps as a response to such excesses, institutions advertise themselves as primarily job-training centers. However, apart from a few very specialized programs like nursing and accounting, what are the specific jobs attached to degrees in English, history, or philosophy—or business studies, psychology, and the others, for that matter? The unfortunate result is that many colleges have tried to become vocational schools while failing to teach vocational skills.

If people are not sure what, if anything, students are learning in college, they are not alone. The institutions themselves and their accreditors are not so sure, either. Recent efforts to assess student learning are an inelegant and ham-fisted response to that uncertainty, just as many of the urban-planning efforts of the 20th century were inadequate responses to the problems of urban life.

The danger is that our colleges will be left with their own versions of freeways, housing projects, and Brutalist architecture. There may not be a college with a monorail (yet), but there are certainly an awful lot with dubious programs to develop skills for the 21st century.

A clear focus on the essentials of civic life—safety, security, cleanliness, sanitation—made our cities strong and, where that has worked, allowed urban dwellers to flourish in the ways we associate with successful cities. People act in unexpected ways, innovate, and create excitement that encourages others.

Focusing on the essentials of intellectual life can do the same for colleges. But recall how little time students spend on their studies and how much money is spent on recreational facilities. Should I add that coaches are the highest-paid employees of most states? The economic necessity of these expenses may be open; the case is closed regarding their relationship to any intellectual drama.

Cities have also invested in projects that were meant to attract people yet do nothing to encourage the social drama that is the real attraction of cities. We must remember, however, that successful cities are not always the most efficient—that is, efficient in a hasty way. New York has, along with London, some of the most expensive real estate in the world tied up in parkland. Should Central Park be sold off to pay the city's debts? No, there is more to a city than balancing a budget and more to balancing a budget than balancing it in one year. Whatever gains might be achieved by the quick sale of parkland would be offset by the long-term erosion in quality of life.

Just so with higher education. Philosophy and art may have no direct relation to a job qualification, but an education without them is as soulless and inhumane as the housing projects that were inflicted on generations of the poor.

Aristotle wrote that any man who did not need to live in a city was either a beast or a god. Here is where the analogy of the city and the university holds most strongly: Large parts of our lives are impossible without other people, not only because we need what they have but also because we need them to encourage us and spur us on. The social drama of urban life arises from the subtle comparisons we make between ourselves and other people when we encounter them regularly. Because of these constant interactions, cities make possible a way of life that we could never achieve in small bands or isolated communities.

Likewise, colleges make possible an intellectual life that only the rare hermit could attain alone. But neither cities nor colleges will achieve their potential spontaneously and without care. Cities can become violent, isolating, and dispiriting. Universities can become indulgent, shortsighted, and hostile to human greatness. We have many cases of both, and even the best are in danger of falling into these vices.

Colleges need to learn from the success of our better cities. First and foremost, they have to understand themselves as the sites of the most significant intellectual experiences many people will ever have. Institutions that can't help students experience such moments, and can't stop getting in the way, will neither survive nor deserve to do so. An education lacking moments of intellectual drama probably *should* be replaced with MOOCs.

An example of colleges getting in the way? New students are consistently anxious about making friends, yet we are selling them on living arrangements that inhibit interaction. According to a new book by Daniel F. Chambliss and Christopher G. Takacs, *How College Works*, friendships are developed most easily in the traditional, long-hallway-style dorms that are being torn down to make way for pod-style apartments that resemble the set of *Friends*. These mini-McMansions defy every sensible study of cities since Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). But parents and prospective students love those apartments and don't understand how counterproductive they are. So our challenge is not only to learn how to foster the unique intellectual drama of college life, but also to be able to explain it to the outside world.

If higher education is going to outlast the 21st century, now is the time to learn from the best of our urban experiences and avoid the fate of our worst.

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