

The University as Innovator in the Urban Community

**by Lloyd Axworthy
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The Institute of Urban Studies





THE UNIVERSITY OF
WINNIPEG

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The Institute of Urban Studies is an independent research arm of the University of Winnipeg. Since 1969, the IUS has been both an academic and an applied research centre, committed to examining urban development issues in a broad, non-partisan manner. The Institute examines inner city, environmental, Aboriginal and community development issues. In addition to its ongoing involvement in research, IUS brings in visiting scholars, hosts workshops, seminars and conferences, and acts in partnership with other organizations in the community to effect positive change.

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During the early years of prairie settlement the land grant universities in the United States and the agriculture college system in Canada were deeply involved in meeting the problems of rural areas. The university then, far from being insular, was active in community service, applied research and training in new techniques.

The same opportunity for active community involvement exists in the new frontier of urban Canada. It is a different kind of frontier; more complex, more difficult to understand. But it too has many problems and the university can help in charting new directions for the urban community.

The Institute of Urban Studies at the University of Winnipeg is one demonstration of how the University can play a useful role. Though less than three years old, it has shown how a university-based urban centre can search for answers to urban problems and provide a source of ideas, advice, support and guidance for the urban community.

The Institute was established in the summer of 1969 on an initial grant from Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation with a mandate to be a centre for applied problem solving.

The Institute was assembled as a relatively autonomous unit within the university, responsible to a separate advisory board set up by the

*Note: This article is drawn from a longer essay contained in a collection of working papers prepared by the Institute of Urban Studies, called The Citizen and Neighbourhood Renewal.

University Board of Regents to advise on policy and help establish guidelines and priorities for Institute projects.

Unlike many university research centres, the Institute was not designed to be another clearing house for academic research ventures. It was to have its own multi-disciplined staff who could hold, though not necessarily, joint appointments in one of the university departments. This freed the Institute from the traditional constraints of academic research and enabled it to enlist the kind of staff not normally found on university facilities. Community organizers and journalists are examples.

The kind of work undertaken by the Institute may be categorized as follows:

Catalyst and Advocate: The Institute has been called upon to initiate programs of change at the neighbourhood level. This is done by presenting new ideas to community groups, helping groups synthesize their own thoughts, undertaking preliminary investigations to pinpoint possible strategies for improvement, helping organize groups, explaining project proposals to government or other funding agencies and helping draft proposals.

This requires the university centre to take risks and become involved in advocate positions. This is often not understood by or acceptable to many in the university as it can plunge the university into controversy. But the university cannot help change unless it is involved. To provide prescriptions for change that can be applied by the community, the university research team can and should be part of innovative activity.

Resource Base and Linkage: This involves supplying skills to various groups, organizing professionals to give assistance, identifying possible areas of support or connecting groups to government. A third party organization such as a university centre can bring together users and suppliers, and provide professional skills that are otherwise unavailable to community groups because of cost or inaccessibility.

Program Management: This involves Institute staff in taking on responsibilities of co-ordination and management of various projects under the supervision of the community groups.

Training: One obvious need in the present urban situation is a different type of professional training. The urban centre provides the student, the practitioner, the neighbourhood worker with the place to develop new skills and an understanding of the connections between different disciplines and professional skills.

Policy Research: The Institute acts as an alternative source of policy ideas. One of the serious dangers in contemporary policy-making is that a monopoly can be achieved by a small cluster of influential administrators and their associates in related private organizations. The university has a responsibility to provide competing, or at least different definitions of what constitutes problems and the solutions that might be employed.

Community Education: The Institute also undertakes an educational role. It sponsors conferences and symposia, gives lectures to a variety of community

groups, schools and universities, professional associations and conventions, produced experimental films and television programs. It provides an outlet for students in the university to become involved in field work and provides research opportunities for faculty.

The Institute is thus engaged in a diverse approach to solving urban problems. It seeks to experiment, organize, teach, evaluate and communicate.

Central to its functioning is its place in the university. From the university it can draw a range of resources -- faculty, students, library, and computer. It can operate on little overhead because it shares in university maintenance, financial administration, personnel services. It acquires a legitimacy from its university base as well as a degree of independence.

There are of course several handicaps.

Finance: The Institute's operation is financed on a yearly grant basis and on a project contract basis. This creates both uncertainty in planning and discontinuity in staff. Until this kind of work is accepted as a legitimate function of the university, equally useful as teaching sociology to freshmen or traditional academic research, then this kind of university-based centre will not be able to realize its full potential.

Acceptability: Many members of the academic profession find the community role of a university is unsettling. It challenges conventional canons of research. It does not fit traditional patterns of university administration and it cuts across discipline lines. Thus, many treat it as an appendage, not as an integral part of the organization.

This tendency can change, however, as more members of the teaching profession see how the existence of a multi-disciplined, problem-solving centre within the university, but working in the community, enriches the

university. It brings into the university setting a new variety of people and concerns and presents the academic community with a new set of research interests.

For different reasons, government officials and political people find the university role in urban affairs threatening. It provides an alternative source of information and ideas, and challenges their policies.

Yet, even with these difficulties, there still remains the central fact that the university can contribute something unique to the urban community.

It can bring to the urban situation a sense of independence, a rich storehouse of resources and a tradition of thoughtful innovation and change. It is not tied down, as government bodies often are, with administrative responsibilities or political constraints. It has research and advisory skills that social agencies cannot provide. It can communicate and translate the ideas, concepts and proposals of different community groups that they may not be able to express. It is not bound by the profit motive as are private business and consultants.

At the same time, it can work with many of the other institutions in the community, enlisting their co-operation and providing skills and services they lack.

Just as in the days of the early prairie pioneers, when the agricultural colleges acted as important agents of change in the rural community, the urban university can help those living in cities find new ways to manage their affairs and bring a sense of humanism to the search.