



2021

The Campus as Commons: Educational Anchor Institutions and their Implications for Political Economy

Cameron N. Conner
Whitman College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/bjur>

Recommended Citation

Conner, Cameron N. (2021) "The Campus as Commons: Educational Anchor Institutions and their Implications for Political Economy," *Butler Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 7 , Article 10. Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/bjur/vol7/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Butler Journal of Undergraduate Research by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

THE CAMPUS AS COMMONS: EDUCATIONAL ANCHOR INSTITUTIONS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR POLITICAL ECONOMY

CAMERON N. CONNER, WHITMAN COLLEGE
MENTOR: KEITH FARRINGTON

Abstract

In this paper, I analyze the growing call for institutions of higher education to better support the communities they are part of and so to act as anchor institutions. After establishing a precise definition of anchor institutions as they exist today, I draw on existing policy, reports, and academic papers to identify the common arguments used to advocate for anchor institutions. Dividing these into four main principles, I contend that the arguments for anchor institutions are fundamentally reliant on the theory of the commons and the underlying political economy it represents. By framing the pioneering work of anchor institutions as acts of commoning, I create a theoretical justification for the proliferation of anchor institutions; therefore, in connecting theory to praxis, this paper is an attempt to illuminate the evolutionary potential of the university as an anchor institution and to promote its capacity to act as a social asset aimed at achieving common abundance rather than at engineering scarcity.

Across the United States, a growing number of colleges and universities have begun to prioritize their relationships with the communities that surround them. At Portland State University, community engagement now counts toward the faculty tenure-review process.¹ In 2016, Emory University committed to purchasing 75% of the food consumed on its campus from “local or sustainably grown sources” by 2025.² Over the course of several years, the University of Minnesota has successfully integrated policies that prioritize local women- and minority-owned contractors for all university construction projects.³ Through these three programs alone, billions of dollars have been channeled into local economic and community development, and these initiatives are not unique. As of 2019, three-quarters of urban universities included commitments to public service within

¹ Hodges and Dubb, *Road Half Traveled*, 45.

² Emory University, 1.

³ Hodges and Dubb, *Road Half Traveled*, 123.

their mission statements.⁴ These factors represent a growing movement that seeks to harness the social, cultural, and economic power of higher education for the well-being of communities that exist beyond campus. As a result of this momentum, colleges and universities are increasingly expected to actively contribute to the communities in which they are located. In their 2019 report on the evolution of town-gown relationships, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* summarized the effect of this growing sentiment with a simple conclusion. “A college may be its own domain,” the introduction acknowledges, “but being part of a larger place increasingly means supporting it in numerous ways.”⁵

Because of the potential impact that these educational institutions can have, colleges and universities⁶ have increasingly come to be thought of as one type of anchor institution.⁷ This term is used to describe institutions that are “grounded” in their community and so are generally unable to leave because of cultural, infrastructural, and economic investment in the location. In recent years, as these ties have been recognized, universities have grown to acknowledge that their institutional success is dependent on the health of their surroundings. Because of their relative size, spatial permanence, and corporate status, such educational anchor institutions also have the capacity to affect surrounding communities by generating and channeling significant resources. The notion of anchor institutions exemplifies the growing demand for universities to play roles in their communities beyond those which education and academia alone can provide.⁸

As these town-gown partnerships have proliferated, a growing body of scholarship on the subject of educational anchor institutions has accumulated; however, much of the existing literature focuses on policy-based analyses of “best practices” by which these institutions can magnify their effects. Frequently left out of this conversation is an ideological analysis of where the pillars of this practice originated. Some national research institutes and nonprofit policy organizations have incorporated the notion of anchor institutions into their own theoretical visions

⁴ Carlson and Bielmiller, “Campus as City,” 8.

⁵ Carlson and Bielmiller, 3.

⁶ For the sake of simplicity, I will use the term “university” through the rest of this paper to refer to all institutions of higher education.

⁷ In addition to colleges and universities, a number of other organizations have come to be seen as anchor institutions. These include hospitals, museums, community arts centers, faith-based institutions, and libraries.

⁸ Though research on education-based anchor institutions is often focused on urban universities that have large research components, all institutions of higher education—from research universities and community colleges to historically black colleges and universities and liberal arts institutions—are to be understood as anchor institutions in their own communities.

for a new political economy, but none have comprehensively unpacked the theoretical traditions that such town-gown partnerships are grounded in. The purpose of this paper is thus to bridge the gap between the policy proposals that have been put forth, on one hand, and the theoretical principles that justify their existence, on the other.

Illuminating this relationship is vital if educational institutions are to realize their full potential as anchor institutions. Underneath the argument that the university should consciously and strategically employ its resources for the welfare of surrounding communities exists a set of implicit principles and assumptions about the relationship among individuals, institutions, and the state within society. If anchor institutions are to be fully understood, let alone functionally realized, these underlying principles and their implications must be brought to light along with the theoretical genealogies underpinning them.⁹

This paper is intended to situate the ever-increasing number of anchor institutions into a broader philosophical context; in essence, it is an attempt to theoretically justify why university-based anchor institutions should exist. I address this question by arguing that the contemporary justifications for anchor institutions stem from a notion of political economy based upon the theory of the commons. By interpreting the argument for anchor institutions through this commons-based framework, I seek to demonstrate that it is possible to illuminate the implicit assumptions and values that motivate these institutional practices and demonstrate why society truly needs both anchor institutions and the theoretical perspective they represent. The implications for this lens are substantial. If the growing popularity of anchor institutions can be interpreted as a manifestation of the commons, it means that key social institutions are beginning to stand at odds with the tenets of contemporary political economy. That is the larger conversation in which this paper is set.

The following pages are divided into four main sections. The first section is dedicated to developing a comprehensive understanding of the term *anchor institution*, specifically as it is applied to the university. The second analyzes the

⁹ To pursue this purpose, my argument is concerned with universities specifically, rather than with all manner of anchor institutions, for three reasons. First, the university has been the most extensively studied and documented type of anchor institution to this point. Second, because the academic nature of the university makes it prone to self-reflection, there is a greater understanding of its social mission and thus of its obligation to society more generally. Finally, as the engines of intellectual advancement, if universities are able to embrace their ability to cultivate community resiliency and so realize this new ethos of engagement, their impact has the potential to be the farthest reaching.

argument for why certain institutions bear an inherent obligation to better both society in general and—importantly—their surrounding communities in particular. The third section then introduces theoretical language of the commons as a productive framework through which to interpret these arguments for institutional engagement, and the paper concludes by exploring the broader implications this argument has for political economy as a whole.

“A New Paradigm”: Defining Anchor Institutions

The idea that institutions of higher education have an obligation to uphold the common good has prevailed since the advent of the earliest European universities in 1200 AD.¹⁰ This social-purpose credo has been manifested in many different ways throughout history. The primary goal of land-grant colleges, for example, was to “solidify the American economic infrastructure.”¹¹ State-run cooperative extension programs, meanwhile, were begun in 1914 to have a more *social* impact by providing better “public and outreach services.”¹² Likewise, “settlement houses” for underserved communities were originally staffed and supported predominantly by university students throughout the late nineteenth century and are exemplary of initiatives of community-driven work that likewise fulfilled the same social-purpose credo.¹³ These examples demonstrate that although the term *anchor institution* is relatively recent, the practices it represents are not.

Despite drawing on this long tradition, the contemporary manifestation of these principles under the label of *anchor institution* is unique. In the context of rising unemployment, inequality, and financial vulnerability during the 1960s, institutions of higher education emerged as a potential mechanism for cultivating economic stability and strength. Motivated by their public-service mission and the exigency of these deteriorating social circumstances, universities began evaluating how they could play larger roles in addressing local issues. To the extent that universities did seek to engage their host communities, however, most saw this primarily as “add-ons” far removed from their primary missions of education and research.¹⁴ The institutionalization of these practices was infrequent unless undertaken by strong leadership within the university.

¹⁰ Cuthill et al., “Universities and the Public Good.”

¹¹ Collier, “Scripting the Radical Critique,” 183.

¹² Hodges and Dubb, *Road Half Traveled*.

¹³ Hodges and Dubb, 4.

¹⁴ Taylor and Luter, *Anchor Institutions*, 2.

The term *anchor institution* as applied to American universities was first coined in 2001 by the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives.¹⁵ Responding to a need to name the growing trend in university (and hospital) engagement that was taking place across the country, the report generated by this assembly defined the phenomenon of anchor institutions as “central city institutions, ‘that have a significant infrastructure investment in a specific community and are therefore unlikely to move.’”¹⁶ The ability to name this new concept and identify its “best practices” catalyzed its popularity throughout the 2000s. This marked a turning point in the evolution of community-focused university engagement. In 2009, the Anchor Institution Task Force (AITF) was created to advise the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) on how the federal government could better leverage anchor institutions as a means of alleviating “significant urban problems.”¹⁷ Simultaneously, an increasing number of universities intentionally began to assume the responsibilities expected of anchor institutions. On both the national and local levels, this concept soon grew to become “a new paradigm for understanding the role that place-based institutions could play in building successful communities and local economies.”¹⁸

Under this new paradigm, anchor institutions were characterized by a relatively straightforward set of qualities. In their 2013 report intended to assess and synthesize the current state of knowledge on anchor institutions, the AITF concisely defined anchor institutions as “large, spatially immobile, mostly non-profit organizations that play an integral role in the local economy.”¹⁹ The potential influence these three qualities represent can be clearly seen in the case of American institutions of higher education. Cumulatively, the approximately 4,100 colleges and universities across the country employ more than four million people, serve 21 million students, possess \$533 billion in endowments, and expend a similar amount in annual economic activity.²⁰ The fact that these institutions individually have significant cultural, infrastructural, and economic investments in their particular locations means that these considerable economic resources are unlikely to disappear any time soon—as might happen, for example, with corporations of a similar scale. Size, spatial immobility, and corporate status are thus the defining

¹⁵ Fullbright-Anderson, Auspos, and Anderson, *Community Involvement*.

¹⁶ Fullbright-Anderson, Auspos, and Anderson as quoted in Harkavy et al., “Effective Governance,” 99.

¹⁷ “Anchor Institutions Task Force.”

¹⁸ Taylor and Luter, *Anchor Institutions*, 3–4.

¹⁹ Taylor and Luter, 8.

²⁰ Snyder, *Digest of Education Statistics*.

features of anchor institutions as they have come to be known, features that a majority of American universities epitomize.

For a university to *act* as an anchor institution, however, these qualities must be employed for a specific purpose, referred to as an *anchor mission*. This mission is defined by Rita Hodges and Steve Dubb in their book *The Road Half Traveled* as “the conscious and strategic application of the long-term, place based economic power of the institution, in combination with its human and intellectual resources, to better the welfare of the community in which it resides.”²¹ The nature of this mission as articulated by Hodges and Dubb is unique. Unlike efforts at engagement by colleges and universities in the past, this mission *does* institutionalize the university’s commitment to community. This institutionalization expands the traditional understanding of a university by equally emphasizing three distinct missions: an education mission, a research mission, and now an anchor mission.²²

Where they have embraced this ethos, educational anchor institutions can adopt a number of economic, social, and/or cultural strategies to strengthen their surrounding communities. Economically, practices often include a commitment to hiring, procuring goods, and investing locally. For example, the university can choose to invest elements of its endowment in local community development financial institutions,²³ as Harvard University and the University of Chicago have done.²⁴ Schools can also choose to source a certain percentage of their produce locally, following the example of Middlebury College, University of Pennsylvania, and many others.²⁵ Socially, universities have increasingly focused on utilizing their academic resources (e.g., graduate or medical students in need of experience, professors interested in making their research more applicable, and undergraduates seeking to develop professional skills) to address local issues. Stony Brook University in Long Island, New York, has encouraged professors and graduate students to prioritize “tackling local issues that support local industries and

²¹ Hodges and Dubb, *Road Half Traveled*, 147.

²² Hodges and Dubb, 147.

²³ Community development financial institutions, or CDFIs, include credit unions, banks, loan funds, and venture capital funds that provide credit and financial assistance to programs and projects that contribute to the development of the local community.

²⁴ In 1999, Harvard provided \$20 million to local CDFIs in Boston. (For more information, see “Anchor Institutions.”) Likewise, in 2012, the University of Chicago decided to shift \$1 million of its endowment into four community banks in a simple act that has since benefited local businesses and homeowners. (See Standish, “U of C Depositing \$1 Mil.”)

²⁵ Carlson and Bielmiller, “Campus as City,” 23.

interests.”²⁶ In the process, the school has harnessed these partnerships to become a well-respected research university.²⁷

Culturally, community colleges, research universities, and liberal arts institutions alike are expanding access to their facilities and are geographically integrating their campuses with cities in order to change the explicit and implicit dynamics between town and gown. Colby College’s newest residence hall is not located on or even adjacent to the campus itself but in the heart of downtown Waterville, Maine. Coincidentally, this facility, which was built to promote partnerships between the campus and city, is called the Main Street Commons.

Examples of institutional engagement abound, and although they differ drastically according to location, all stem from the recognition that universities and the communities they are part of have stakes in the success of each other. To again quote the *Chronicle of Higher Education*’s 2019 report “The Campus as City,” the popularity of educational anchor institutions is based on a growing realization that, “whether in small towns or in transforming cities, colleges have opportunities to stoke local economies, expand community resources, and prove their value to the public. At the same time, they can fortify themselves for years ahead.”²⁸ This sentiment is the foundation upon which the term *anchor institution* is based. I turn now to the individual planks that constitute this platform and make up the argument for why its sentiment is relevant.

The Argument for Anchor Institutions

Having flushed out a general understanding of modern anchor institutions in the previous section, we can now identify the steps by which they are popularly justified. The main sources available in doing so are the policy proposals and evaluation reports that have been written to further institutions’ anchor missions. Using these documents as a starting point, this section identifies four main premises that underlie contemporary arguments for anchor institutions. Isolating these premises will make it possible for the next section to demonstrate how they are fundamentally grounded in a theory of the commons.

The argument for the existence of educational anchor institutions most often begins by articulating an unresolved problem. The picture painted of this problem is of American cities—and communities more generally—in a state of crisis. It calls

²⁶ Carlson and Bielmiller, 31.

²⁷ Carlson and Bielmiller, 31.

²⁸ Carlson and Bielmiller, 9.

attention to cities across the United States where infrastructure is increasingly outdated and overwhelmed, poverty and homelessness have grown to epidemic proportions, and, because of declining industrial demand, those economies are failing.

The 2013 HUD report “Building Resiliency: The Role of Anchor Institutions in Sustaining Community Economic Development” begins with the example of Chester, Pennsylvania. Chester, this report claims, epitomizes the problems of “poverty, stagnation, and unemployment” that can be seen throughout urban America. The woes of the city, a former center for automobile manufacturing and shipbuilding, are said to stem “from the late 20th-century decline of an industrial economy in the United States.”²⁹

Similarly, in April of 2009, the AITF submitted to the HUD Secretary a report that aimed to demonstrate the power of “Anchor Institutions as Partners in Building Successful Communities and Local Economies.” This report, too, begins its argument by premising the problem of urban crisis, claiming that these deteriorating circumstances are a direct result of both deindustrialization and globalization. The AITF’s analysis of this disinvestment parallels that of the 2013 HUD report, stating, “Deindustrialization and globalization have undermined the traditional manufacturing-based economies in many American cities and metropolitan areas, leaving unemployment, poor schooling and general poverty in their place.”³⁰ These two documents are emblematic of a much larger body of work that advocates for leveraging the power of anchor institutions. The problem they pose is primarily economic: cities are failing because traditional economies have been undermined by the social, technological, and global conditions of the latter part of the twentieth century. The logical conclusion left for the audience to draw is that a new economy of investment is desperately needed if these communities are to be saved.

If the first premise is that a crisis exists, the second premise asserts that so, too, do untapped assets for resolving the crisis. In 2002, the Initiative for a Competitive Inner City (ICIC) and CEOs for Cities summarized this idea in their report entitled *Leveraging Colleges and Universities for Urban Economic Revitalization*. The report concludes that, “despite their considerable size, colleges and universities are often overlooked as a component of urban economies.”³¹ Furthermore, not only are institutions a component of economic reinvigoration, but

²⁹ “Building Resiliency,” 8.

³⁰ Godsil and Brophy, *Retooling HUD*, 148.

³¹ *Leveraging Colleges and Universities*, 7.

their potential impact could be “enormous.”³² The report continues, “[Colleges and universities] have significant purchasing power, attract substantial revenues for their surrounding economies, invest heavily in local real estate and infrastructure, are major employers, and help to train the workforce and nurture new businesses.”³³ Together, these two premises present what seems to be a perfectly balanced equation: with the deterioration of a manufacturing economy has come the rise of a knowledge economy, and as the former’s investment is lost, the latter’s should be expected.

ICIC and CEOs for Cities are not alone in identifying the potential present in universities. Alan Mallach, a Visiting Scholar at the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, has publicly extolled this same idea. Speaking on the subject of educational anchor institutions, Mallach expressed that “many of the same cities that are facing rampant disinvestment also ‘contain significant—although often underutilized—assets that may well be pivotal to the economic future of their metro areas and regions.’”³⁴ While serving as a testament to the second premise of the justification of anchor institutions, Mallach’s use of the term *asset* is also rhetorically meaningful. Assets can be used to address a debt, restore financial or social stability in the community, and, in doing so, cultivate resiliency to combat future insecurity. Moreover, as the third premise will make evident, these assets are perfectly positioned to address the crisis already outlined.

Although these assets do not constitute a silver bullet and cannot fully replace the economic opportunities originally provided by the vanishing industrial sector, proponents argue that the assets are perfectly situated to *begin* addressing the issue. In the words of Ira Harkavy, founding director of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania, “Universities and colleges ... potentially represent by far the most powerful partners, ‘anchors,’ and creative catalysts for change and improvement in the quality of life in American cities and communities.”³⁵ Again, this quote implies that the equation can be balanced so long as the right variables are manipulated.

Presented as a balanced symbiotic relationship between different elements of society, this idea of a balanced equation borrows on the theories of journalist, author, and activist Jane Jacob’s groundbreaking book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, published in 1961. Heralded by the *New York Times* as “perhaps

³² *Leveraging Colleges and Universities*, 7.

³³ *Leveraging Colleges and Universities*, 2.

³⁴ “Building Resiliency,” 1.

³⁵ Quoted in Hodges and Dubb, *Road Half Traveled*, xvii.

the most influential single work in the history of town planning,” Jacob’s text was one of the first to present a new theory of organic urban vibrancy that soon became the standard for all urban policy.³⁶ The heart of her argument contends that cities need “a more intricate and close-grained diversity of uses that give each other constant mutual support, both economically and socially.”³⁷ Viewed through this lens, a city’s failure to appropriately leverage the assets at its disposal can be read as a failure on the part of community leaders to integrate this system of mutual support—the logical result of which is likely to be imbalance and crisis. Although the concept of large public and private educational institutions taking on anchor missions is one step removed from Jacob’s discussion of sidewalks and neighborhoods, both nonetheless revolve around an inherent principle that “people must take a modicum of public responsibility for each other even if they have no ties to each other.”³⁸

This element of social and institutional integration is the third major premise underlying contemporary arguments for anchor institutions. That is, in order for the crisis-mitigating potential of anchor institutions to be tapped, this premise posits, the relationships that bind various elements of society together must be recognized. In this sense, specific mechanisms of governance are required for Jacob’s system of mutual support to exist. Only with such structure can the “assets” of universities be employed to address America’s economic crises. Whether financial, social, or cultural, assets can exist relatively isolated and unrealized, their relative benefits going without use. Likewise, that colleges and universities possess the potential to act as economic engines in their local communities does not mean they will always act on this potential. Without the appropriate knowledge, technology, or procedures of implementation, the resources that these assets represent cannot be accessed and channeled to their full effect—the effect in question being a university’s anchor mission to “better the welfare of the community in which it resides.”³⁹ As such, to unlock the power that anchor institutions hold and, in so doing, resolve the crises that plague American cities, structures of governance must be in place to facilitate the institutional integration required for the realization of Jacob’s notion of mutual support.

Success, whether individual or institutional, is herein framed as a system of collaboration between the individual, society, and nature. No one person is solely

³⁶ Fulford, “Jane Jacobs.”

³⁷ Jacobs, *Great American Cities*, 14.

³⁸ Jacobs, 83.

³⁹ Hodges and Dubb, *Road Half Traveled*. 147.

responsible for their accomplishments in life; even the most “self-made” individual draws “upon a vast pool of knowledge and natural gifts they did nothing to create.”⁴⁰ In place of the individualist ideal, this blueprint for mutual support posits that *all* success arises from and depends continuously on the success of others. By mapping the relationships that bind university engagement to their social surroundings, contemporary advocates of anchor institutions implicitly emphasize an interdependence that constitutes a “culture of community”—the feeling that “we’re all in this together.”⁴¹ To summarize: in response to the crisis caused by globalization and deindustrialization, colleges and universities have risen to prominence as a means of combating disinvestment. Their institutional ability to do so, however, depends on a collaborative social dynamic that assumes the health of a community is co-constitutive and not a zero-sum war for individual survival.

The final premise of the argument for anchor institutions is that universities should, and in fact have an obligation to, address the societal crises that their communities face. This premise is founded on the assumption that acting in the best interest of the community is itself a form of enlightened self-interest for the university. For example, just as an institution’s educational mission correlates with its fiduciary success, so too does the emphasis on its anchor mission. In this sense, the university that chooses to act on its anchor mission is not doing so based on sheer altruism but rather on a broader appreciation of all the factors that contribute to its success. A student’s decision to enroll at the university, or the university’s ability to attract the best-suited professors, has as much to do with life beyond campus as life within. In other words, an institution, like an individual, does not exist in a vacuum. Furthermore, by encouraging these relationships and helping to solve real-world problems as they are manifested locally, universities can also further their other missions of research, teaching, and service that society expects of them.⁴² Institutions of higher education thus have “a strong economic stake in the health of their surrounding communities and—due to the scale and scope of their operations—the resources to make a genuine difference.”⁴³ Because universities have the ability to make a significant difference in the lives of those around them, the cumulative implication of these factors is that they have a strong incentive, and logical responsibility, to do so.

⁴⁰ Rowe and Barnes, *Our Common Wealth*, 72–73.

⁴¹ Alperovitz, *Pluralist Commonwealth*, 63.

⁴² Godsil and Brophy, “Retooling HUD,” 148. Hodges and Dubb, *Road Half Traveled*, xvii.

⁴³ Harkavy et al., “Effective Governance,” 99.

As the premises that are commonly used to justify educational anchor institutions have been identified, a compelling overall theory for the existence of anchor institutions has begun to emerge. The equation is relatively simple: There is a crisis, and assets exist to address it. These assets, and those who traditionally manage them, bear an inherent responsibility to mitigate the crisis, but the proper relationships and procedures must exist so such assets can be “tapped.” Beyond highlighting the rhetorical logic of this argument, however, the identification of these four premises illuminates an underlying narrative about the role of educational institutions in society. This narrative holds that such key social institutions have a responsibility to serve the common good rather than just their own, and it is in this narrative that we find an inherent reliance upon the theory of the commons. It is to this theoretical connection that we now turn.

A Framework for Interpretation: The Theory of the Commons

Having illuminated the fundamental assumptions that dominate the field of anchor-institution research, we can begin to see how these assumptions fundamentally stem from a theoretical tradition of self-governance that is distinct from both market- and state-centered methods. This strain of political economy is often referred to simply as “the commons.” Interpreting university-based anchor institutions through this lens reveals a much more authentic image of their nature—an image that provides both a better understanding of these institutions overall and the tools with which to hold them accountable to their anchor missions. To establish the relationship between the theory of the commons and the basic arguments in support of anchor institutions, this section will offer a brief overview of the central pillars of commons theory before exploring relationship of those pillars to the premises enumerated in the previous section.

The origin of the term *commons* is often attributed to the system of agrarian land governance widely used in medieval England. Prior to the enclosure movement of the 1700s,⁴⁴ significant tracts of English countryside were collectively owned by those who worked them. Although this land was most frequently part of an estate held by the lord of the manor under permission of the

⁴⁴The term *enclosure* refers to the process by which collective or commonly held land is divided into individual parcels and privatized. The enclosure movement mentioned here occurred primarily between 1760 and 1820 throughout England. During this time, land use became restricted to those who claimed official ownership so that in village after village, common rights were lost. The resulting landless laborer (often pauperized) was “left to support the tenant-farmer, the landowner, and the tithes of the church.” For more information, see E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963).

Crown, those who worked the land managed its use. Under this system, these “commoners” dictated the number of grazing animals allowed to pasture, and/or the number of trees that could be cut for wood. Even the lord himself was bound to obey these rules. First practiced in the early 1500s and codified into law in 1827, the system expected that the lord “leave pasture enough to satisfy the commoner’s rights whether such rights are to be exercised or not.”⁴⁵ In this way, resources were managed *in common* rather than privately. The system of political interaction that governed these communities grew out of this method of property distribution and the system of social organization it supported. Author, activist, and scholar Sylvia Federici describes this system in her book *Caliban and the Witch* as a series of “vast communalistic social movements” that, prior to implementation of feudalism, “offered the promise of a new egalitarian society built on social equality and cooperation.”⁴⁶ Systems of “commoning” have existed successfully for millennia and belie the assumption that any resource accessible to a community at large will inevitably be exploited to the point of nonexistence.⁴⁷

Contemporary use of the commons as a theoretical framework began with concerns over natural resources. As these assets were increasingly depleted to the brink of collapse, politicians, scientists, sociologists, biologists, business owners, and others sought a new way of managing them. Alike, they observed that “neither the state nor the market is uniformly successful in enabling individuals to sustain long-term, productive, use of natural resource systems.”⁴⁸ In *Governing the Commons*, one of the first comprehensive studies on the practice of commoning worldwide, American political economist and Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom introduced this concept as a “theory of self-organizing and self-governing forms of collective action.”⁴⁹ This notion has been a fundamental principle within commons theory since the publication of Ostrom’s text in 1990. Since then, the term *commons* has evolved from referring exclusively to natural resources to referring to a combination of (1) resources, whether natural, social, or cultural, (2) the larger community within which these resources reside, and (3) the set of social protocols that governs interactions between the first two.⁵⁰ The interplay between these elements underscores the fact that the practice of commoning is about much more

⁴⁵ Halsbury, *Laws of England*, 508.

⁴⁶ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 61.

⁴⁷ An argument first put forward by ecologist Garrett Hardin in 1968 as a critique of the commons. Since the publication of Hardin’s article, his critique has come to popularly be known as the tragedy of the commons.

⁴⁸ Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, 1.

⁴⁹ Ostrom, 25.

⁵⁰ Bollier, *Think Like a Commoner*, 15.

than shared resources; to quote David Bollier, founder of the Commons Strategies Group, “It’s mostly about the social practices and values that we devise to manage them.”⁵¹

This emphasis on community does not ignore the undeniably powerful self-interest of human beings that liberal economists have for centuries posited as the driving force of individual and social prosperity. Rather, it seeks to contextualize this reality within a broader understanding of human nature. Humans may indeed have unattractive traits fueled by individual fears and ego, “but we are also creatures entirely capable of self-organizing and cooperation; with a concern for fairness and social justice; and willing to make sacrifices for the larger good and future generations.”⁵² Looked at through this lens, a successful commons is simply a space in which individuals have learned to collectively govern their community so as to balance these ego-centric qualities for the well-being of all.

The successful management of a commons is based on principles of decentralized governance and collective accountability. Within this system of management, “ownership” is exercised at the level of the community rather than the individual.⁵³ As with the pastures of fifteenth-century England, wealth in this sense is held in common. Though this concept of commonwealth may on the surface appear similar to philosophies of state-socialism, it is distinguished by a focus on scale and decentralization. Commons-based theory rests on the principle of subsidiarity, “the idea being that decentralized, small-scale solutions, should as far as possible be a default option.”⁵⁴ In other words, when given an option, effective self-governance requires that decisions be made at the lowest possible level. This system allows wealth to be sustainably held in common because those who hold it know the unique context in which it exists and so are able to best regulate it. To return to the natural-resource analogy, the commons works “because people come to know and experience the management of a resource in its unique aspects. They come to depend on each other and love *this* forest or *that* lake or *that* patch of farmland.”⁵⁵ As a result of this interdependence, individuals hold one another accountable for the stewardship of these resources. The underlying principle in this practice is that “the relationships between people and their

⁵¹ Bollier, 19.

⁵² Bollier and Helfrich, eds., *Wealth of the Commons*, xv.

⁵³ Alperovitz, *Pluralist Commonwealth*, 59.

⁵⁴ Alperovitz, 83.

⁵⁵ Bollier, *Think Like a Commoner*, 12.

resources matter.”⁵⁶ The intimacy of these relationships is what allows for—and in fact demands—self-governance and the collective management of resources, be they natural, cultural, digital, institutional, or otherwise.

In sum, the theory of the commons posits that all humans inherit innumerable “gifts” from society and the natural world. These assets are inherited jointly, and together, individuals hold them in trust for future generations. It is considered essential to both human and planetary well-being that we do so. Economists and many others often fail to account for how commons contribute to social and economic prosperity, however, because those contributions are difficult to monetize and also because the liberal economists’ archetypal *homo economicus* acts solely on a rationality defined by self-gain alone.⁵⁷ Above all else, the language of the commons creates a unifying vocabulary that sheds light on the otherwise often ignored foundation of human existence—the social, natural, and cultural inheritances that all individuals share—so they can be passed on, undiminished and, hopefully, enhanced.

Despite relying on principles and rhetoric that can be easily interpreted as utopian, the commons is not a foreign or radically liberal idea. In fact, this theory owes as much to traditional conservative values as to more progressive thought. To quote self-described conservative Jonathan Rowe, “Conservatism is, or at least used to be, a way of thinking about society as a whole and the qualities that help maintain it.”⁵⁸ Traces of commons theory thus can be found across the political spectrum. And far from being antithetical to the important societal aspects of market or state, this commonwealth system of political economy is important insofar as it maintains a balance between these elements. Markets are uniquely able to coordinate the actions of many decentralized social actors, connecting need (demand) to surplus (supply).⁵⁹ Commons theory acknowledges that for any community to successfully fulfill the needs of its members, this ability to coordinate demand and supply must exist. It is only when the market is left unchecked that theorists critique it for reducing goods and services to the base denominator of commercial exchange and

⁵⁶ Bollier, 12. In her text *Colonial Lives of Property* (Duke University Press, 2018), Brenna Bhandar develops a powerful and complementary critique of the systemic destruction of these intimate relationships among individuals, their surroundings, and the fabric of society. She terms this process “abstraction.” Bhandar’s argument lends a valuable perspective on the inextricable relationship between the way in which property is defined under neoliberalism and continuing practices of colonialism and imperialism. She terms this mutually constitutive relationship a “racial regime of ownership.”

⁵⁷ Rowe and Barnes, *Our Common Wealth*, 11.

⁵⁸ Rowe and Barnes, 54.

⁵⁹ Alperovitz, *Pluralist Commonwealth*, 166.

for elevating pursuit of profit above the satisfaction of human and community needs as a result.⁶⁰ The state likewise has the potential to catalyze or cultivate healthy commons by creating spaces in which they can flourish; its threat, however, lies in the tendency to infringe on the commons by centralizing governance and formalizing what should be intimate and place-based relationships. Together, the three elements of market, state, and commons are mutually constitutive and necessary for a flourishing society. The danger arises only when their balance is thrown off and communities risk losing the shared gifts that allowed them to thrive in the first place.

Long before they were labeled as anchor institutions, colleges and universities had a well-established relationship with commons theory. Typically, this was because of their unique ability to help diverse communities come together and produce knowledge. As Professors Madison, Fischmann, and Strandburg have put it, the university is inherently a “constructed cultural commons.”⁶¹ In this sense, it functions as a space dedicated to the cooperative generation of knowledge. Competition, rivalry, and profit-making doubtless exist in this process, but there is a general presumption “that knowledge should not become a proprietary product.”⁶² Very little in academia is based solely on the purchase or sale of these ideas; the practice of peer review exemplifies this tradition of collaboration for the sake of knowledge above all else. Such practices are typical in the university, for the academic community has become the cultivator of this particular resource. In this more traditional framing of the university as a commons, the university represents an inherited asset to be collectively stewarded because it holds the common gift of knowledge on which new generations can build.

In contrast to this framing, however, the argument for anchor institutions presents a new way of perceiving the university as a commons. The premises outlined in the previous section imply that although valuable, the depiction of the university as a constructed cultural commons is incomplete, in that universities have a larger role to play within their communities beyond facilitating the pursuit and integrity of knowledge. Culturally, an institution of higher education can act as an incubator of and reservoir for learning, but it also, socially and economically,

⁶⁰ Alperovitz, 165.

⁶¹ Bollier, *Think Like a Commoner*, 72.

⁶² Bollier, *Think Like a Commoner*, 73.

has the potential to stimulate and stabilize the town, city, or region in which it is located.

The university is far more of a commons than academics often acknowledge. For example, the University of Pennsylvania not only provides a repository for knowledge and learning but also acts as a conduit for engagement between the institution (consisting of academic, human, and corporate resources) and the community of West Philadelphia. The school's Comprehensive Neighborhood Revitalization plan engages other community organizations and affected community members to collectively govern how these resources will be employed. In a parallel vein, Miami Dade Community College embraces its anchor mission through similar programs that emphasize its surroundings,⁶³ describing itself as an "opportunity pipeline" (which flows both ways) connecting stakeholders both on and off its various campuses in order to "effect community change and [community] wealth building."⁶⁴ These case studies demonstrate and embody a broader understanding of the university operating as a commons. The logic behind this is relatively simple: local communities provide vast tax subsidies and in many other ways contribute to the existence and success of universities, actively collaborating to steward a common resource. In return, anchor-institution advocates argue, these communities should be able to jointly draw upon these assets for their collective benefit.

In sum, the practices of anchor institutions rely on a very specific set of assumptions that are intimately linked to the theory of the commons. Whereas traditional depictions of the university as a commons highlight only the arena of knowledge stewardship, contemporary justifications of anchor institutions can and should be understood as expanding this model to social and economic realms, with universities constituting assets in more than one regard. Just as with commonly held irrigation systems that have existed in the south of Spain for centuries, or rapidly proliferating digital commons such as Wikipedia and open-access scholarly publishing platforms, a university is an intergenerational collaboration of individuals, society, and nature. As such, the outcomes of such collaboration are intersectional and reach far beyond a cultural, economic, or social impact alone. To

⁶³ Examples of these programs include the college's inclusive hiring practices, its goal of directing 20%–27% of purchasing dollars toward minority-owned businesses, projects that provide entrepreneurial and educational support to micro-enterprises, nonprofits, and individuals through the Meek Center, and focused neighborhood-revitalization initiatives. More information can be found in Hodges and Dubb, *Road Half Traveled*, 49.

⁶⁴ Interview with Eduardo J. Padrón, President of Miami Dade College, in Hodges and Dubb, *Road Half Traveled*, 48.

analyze this relationship, let us now more thoroughly interpret the justification for university-based anchor institutions by applying the language of the commons.

The first premise underlying educational anchor institutions is that American cities are in crisis. This assumption stems directly from the principle of commons theory claiming that both state and market have failed—and always will fail—to sustainably manage humanity’s inherited common wealth. When left to their own devices, commons theorists argue, both systems of political economy will trend toward crisis. On the one hand, the state veers toward a Hobbesian Leviathan, wherein a sovereign, brutal force ensures public cooperation and order through raw coercion.⁶⁵ On the other, the market habitually colonizes individuals, spaces, and relationships, reducing the world to the single dimension of monetary value.

Under the logic of commons theory, then, the negative externalities of globalization and deindustrialization that afflict American cities have resulted from the inherent limitations of contemporary market- and state-based systems of political economy. The crises that have resulted are natural results of a system based on an ever-expanding dispossession that is synonymous with the enclosure of the commons. Crisis has thus arisen because the resources within American cities have been poorly stewarded, because of both the market’s exploitation and the state’s oppressive centralization. Ostrom’s conclusion rings true: “Neither the state nor the market is uniformly successful in enabling individuals to sustain long-term, productive use of natural resource systems.”⁶⁶ The forces of globalization and deindustrialization are the economic embodiments of a system that prioritizes profit over human well-being and exploits society’s collective inheritances. In response to these crises, advocates of anchor institutions are effectively proposing a return to the practices of the commons.

This solution presents universities as assets perfectly suited to confront the crisis precisely because of their ability to act as a specific kind of commons. Rather than turning toward traditional solutions grounded in a market or state paradigm, those who advocate for the application of anchor institutions are relying on a commons-based approach. As a means of combating economic crisis and addressing the basic needs of a community, anchor institutions are unique. Instead of implementing state-based social programs or mandating austerity measures and giving tax incentives to outside corporations, cities and towns that follow an anchor-institution model of economic rehabilitation are turning to the assets already

⁶⁵ Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, 9.

⁶⁶ Ostrom, 1.

shared within their communities. By partnering with one of the 4,100 universities across the country and, by implication, that school's portion of the four million employees, \$533 billion in endowments, and 21 million students, a community is, in essence, beginning to reinstall a system of self-organization and governance at the local level.

Educational anchor institutions have been widely hailed as a solution to America's economic woes precisely because of the qualities they share with the commons. First, they embody an intimate relationship between people and place, as the school is anchored in a specific community; second, the institution itself represents an inherited asset to be held in trust for future generations; and third, the success of any town-gown relationship relies on the principle of subsidiarity, which will necessarily prioritize small-scale, decentralized solutions. Depicted as assets, universities exist in a space between public and private with the potential to benefit a broader common good. To approach a local institution of higher education as a source of community investment in response to the crises of globalization and deindustrialization is to view it as a common social and economic resource, but even so, such an institution is clearly not an "asset" alone, as with any commons.

The university acting according to its anchor mission is simultaneously a resource for the community at large, a community in and of itself, and a unique matrix of social protocols. If the university is to serve as an anchor institution for a larger community, this complex interplay therefore requires a system of self-governance within the community. In order for resources to be employed at all, the university, its surrounding neighbors, local government, etc. must collectively agree on a method of governing (either formally or informally) their interdependent relationship. Only by effectively regulating the use of these resources can such relationships be justified by both the university and the community. These are the "certain forms of governance" that must be in place to promote the social and institutional integration required by the third major premise of anchor institutions. If Jane Jacobs's ideal of "constant mutual support" between the diverse elements of society is to be realized, the intricate maze of these relationships must be navigated.⁶⁷ This embodies the notion of a political economy "organized on principles of interdependence, designed with a coherent orientation towards the common good," upon which the theory of the commons is founded.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Jacobs, *Great American Cities*, 14.

⁶⁸ Alperovitz, *Pluralist Commonwealth*, 58.

If the university is to operate as an anchor institution within the dynamics of a commons, not only must there exist a way of sustainably stewarding collective resources, but the university itself must have an incentive to act in accordance with an anchor mission—as specified by the fourth premise underlying educational anchor institutions. As stipulated in this premise, universities possess an “enlightened self-interest” that motivates their collaboration with outside actors in the community, a motivation stemming from the recognition that no institution can be successful in total isolation. This same realization has supported systems of commoning for centuries. As both a steward of the commons and a community reliant upon that common wealth, the university is dependent on its own reservoir of inherited assets: a functioning municipality that ensures the upkeep of public infrastructure, a healthy environment with minimal pollution and plentiful natural resources, and local institutions capable of attracting prospective students and professors. It is thus in the best interest of a university to steward these resources in turn. It is worth repeating that institutions of higher education “have a strong economic stake in the health of their surrounding communities and—due to the scale and scope of their operations—the resources to make a genuine difference.”⁶⁹ Broadly, it is this principle of incentivized collaboration that allows a community to combat the problems of free riding, lack of commitment, and compliance monitoring that typically confront a commons.⁷⁰

As the constitutive elements of the argument for educational anchor institutions are drawn out, a broader theory explaining their existence and necessity comes into focus. The theoretical principles used to justify this logic stem not from a political economy based on either market or state but rather from one grounded firmly in the notion of the commons. The policy-based analysis of “best practices,” to which much of the existing scholarship on anchor institutions has so far been dedicated, consistently prioritizes small over big, local over distant, and nonmonetary over monetary relationships.⁷¹ From the premise that a crisis of deindustrialization and globalization exists, to the conclusion that the solution is a return to the assets that are already present within a community, contemporary arguments on behalf of educational anchor institutions are firmly entrenched in the ideals of the commons. The argument for anchor institutions not only justifies an expanded interpretation of the university as a commons but also premises the pioneering work already being done to create an alternative political economy set

⁶⁹ Harkavy et al., “Effective Governance,” 99.

⁷⁰ Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, 27. For more on how commons mitigate these issues, see Ostrom’s third chapter, “Analyzing Long-Enduring, Self-Organized, and Self-Governed CPRs.”

⁷¹ Rowe and Barnes, *Our Common Wealth*, 2.

free from the binary of market and state. If the pragmatic practices of anchor institutions can truly be said to rest on this theoretical foundation, however, the question becomes, What are the implications of such practices of institutional engagement?

Conclusion

The historic design of the university has been to create walled cities dedicated to the pursuit of scholarship and knowledge—an educational fiefdom. What I am arguing is in fact the opposite. I advocate for the university adopting an alternative metaphor for its identity. In place of the citadel, a paragon of isolated, uncontaminated intellectualism, the academy must instead aspire toward the commons. Human beings develop, adopt, and live by metaphors. We have lived for decades with a certain model for the institutionalization of academia. It is time we consider another.

By realizing the potential of universities to act as social assets aimed at achieving common abundance rather than engineering scarcity, anchor institutions inherently disrupt the dominating narratives of individuality, autonomy, production, and commodification that mark our current paradigm. What do we want at the center of our world: growth and consumption, or sustainability and collective stewardship? One is based upon private wealth, the other on common wealth. One is based upon competition, the other on cooperation.

Commons theory premises a universal interdependence that directly contradicts liberal economics' rational, autonomous, and self-sufficient *homo economicus*. As a groundbreaking manifestation of this, arguments for educational anchor institutions rely on a desire to cultivate community wealth, which will act as a foundation upon which individuals and future generations alike can build. This is not a novel idea; from Wendell Berry to Alexis de Tocqueville, scholars have noted the importance of “a proper community” and “self-interest rightly understood.” By drawing a connection between educational anchor institutions and the commons, this paper is meant as the beginning of a much larger conversation. The popularity of educational anchor institutions at home and abroad is a promising sign of what may come. Universities are still developing what it means to be an anchor institution. The concept has evolved substantially in recent history. My analysis provides universities that seek to embody the role of anchor institution with an aspirational ideal. As educational anchor institutions encounter new challenges and confront opposition from both market and state rationales, the challenge will be to hold the evolution accountable to the ideals that make it so revolutionary.

Bibliography

- Alperovitz, Gar. *Principles of a Pluralist Commonwealth*. Washington, DC: Democracy Collaborative, 2017.
- “Anchor Institutions.” Community-Wealth.org. June 21, 2012. <https://community-wealth.org/strategies/panel/anchors/index.html>.
- “Anchor Institutions Task Force (AITF).” Marga, Inc. Accessed August 9, 2019. <https://www.margainc.com/aitf/>.
- Bollier, David. *Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons*. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2014.
- Bollier, David, and Silke Helfrich, eds. *The Wealth of the Commons: A World Beyond Market and State*. Amherst, MA: Levellers Press, 2012.
- “Building Resiliency: The Role of Anchor Institutions in Sustaining Community Economic Development.” Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of University Partnerships, 2013.
- Carlson, Scott, and Lawrence Biellmiller. *The Campus as City: Crucial Strategies to Bolster Town-Gown Relations and Run a Thriving 21st-Century Institution*. Washington DC: Chronicle of Higher Education, 2019.
- Collier, James. “Scripting the Radical Critique of Science: The Morrill Act and the American Land-Grant University.” *Futures* 34 (2002): 182–191.
- Cuthill, Michael, E. O’Shea, B. Wilson, and P. Viljoen. “Universities and the Public Good: A Review of Knowledge Exchange Policy and Related University Practice in Australia,” *Australian Universities’ Review* 56, no. 2 (2014): 36–46.
- Emory University Sustainable Food Committee. “Sustainability Guidelines for Food Service Purchasing.” Emory University. May 27, 2016. <https://sustainability.emory.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/SustFoodPurchGuidelns5-27-16.pdf>.
- Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. New York: Autonomedia, 2004.

- Fulford, Robert. "When Jane Jacobs Took on the World." *New York Times Book Review*, February 16, 1992.
archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/01/04/08/specials/jacobs.html.
- Fullbright-Anderson, Karen, Patricia Auspos, and Andrea Anderson. *Community Involvement in Partnerships with Educational Institutions, Medical Centers, and Utility Companies*. Aspen, CO: Aspen Institute Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives, 2001.
- Godsil, Rachel, and Paul C. Brophy. *Retooling HUD for a Catalytic Federal Government: A Report to the Secretary Shaun Donovan*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Penn Institute for Urban Research, February, 2009.
- Halsbury, Hardinge Stanley Giffard, ed. *The Laws of England: Being a Complete Statement of the Whole Law of England*. London: Butterworth, 1908.
- Harkavy, Ira, Matthew Hartley, Rita A. Hodges, Anthony Sorrentino, and Joann Weeks. "Effective Governance of a University as an Anchor Institution: University of Pennsylvania as a Case Study." *Leadership and Governance in Higher Education 2* (2014): 98–116.
https://www.nettercenter.upenn.edu/sites/default/files/Effective_Governance_of_a_University_as_an_Anchor_Institution-Raabe_Publishers.pdf.
- Hodges, Rita Axelroth, and Steve Dubb. *The Road Half Traveled: University Engagement at a Crossroads*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012.
- Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.
- Leveraging Colleges and Universities for Urban Economic Revitalization: An Action Agenda*. Boston, MA: CEOs for Cities and Initiative for a Competitive Inner City, 2002.
- Ostrom, Elinor. *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Rowe, Jonathan, and Peter Barnes. *Our Common Wealth: The Hidden Economy That Makes Everything Else Work*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2013.

Snyder, Thomas. *Digest of Education Statistics, 2016*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2016.

Standish, Jennifer. "U of C Depositing \$1 Mil into Four Community Banks." *Chicago Maroon*, May 18, 2012.

Taylor, Henry Louis Jr., and Gavin Luter. *Anchor Institutions: An Interpretive Review Essay*. New York: Anchor Institutions Task Force, 2013.