

Progressive Approaches to University-Community Relations

The Town-Gown Story in Burlington

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The City of Burlington (population 40,000) is home to the University of Vermont, Champlain College and Burlington College. UVM alone enrolls some 7,300 undergraduate students and almost 9,000 students overall. With the university just a half-mile up the hill from the city center, Burlington's urban amenities—its arts and culture, restaurants, coffee houses and retail outlets—are within easy reach of the campus. UVM students have a significant, positive impact on our local economy. At the same time, students have had a profound effect on rental housing availability, rent levels and noise in the neighborhoods adjacent to downtown and the university.

City concerns about student pressure on our rental housing market, on neighborhoods, and on traffic and parking congestion peaked in the late 1980s as UVM's enrollment grew dramatically. Burlington attempted to encourage and cajole the university into mitigating

some of the impacts of its burgeoning student body—without success. When UVM submitted its application for a new microbiology building, the city finally had the leverage it needed to get the attention of the institution on the hill. The Burlington Zoning Board conditioned its 1989 approval of the new building on UVM's providing additional on-campus student housing and parking. By March 1990, the city and the university had entered into an agreement to address a range of housing, parking and traffic issues.

As part of that agreement, UVM began requiring sophomores to join freshmen in living on-campus, and established programs to address the impact

of students on neighborhood quality of life. UVM also increased its on-campus parking, implemented an extensive campus-area transportation system and involved the medical center and other local colleges in ongoing transportation planning and management. In addition, the university contributed significantly to the widening and reconstruction of Main Street, the major gateway to the city and the campus.

UVM also agreed in 1990 to provide on-campus housing for an additional 850 students. Over the years that followed, however, some at UVM began to argue that declining undergraduate enrollment prevented the university from achieving a net increase in the on-campus student population. It is worth noting that, when the 1990 agreement was signed, Burlington's rental housing vacancy rate was about 5 percent; today that rate is less than one quarter of 1 percent. The effect of students in tightening this market was clearly documented in a 1998 study commissioned jointly by the city and the university, and the issue became an increasing source of tension.

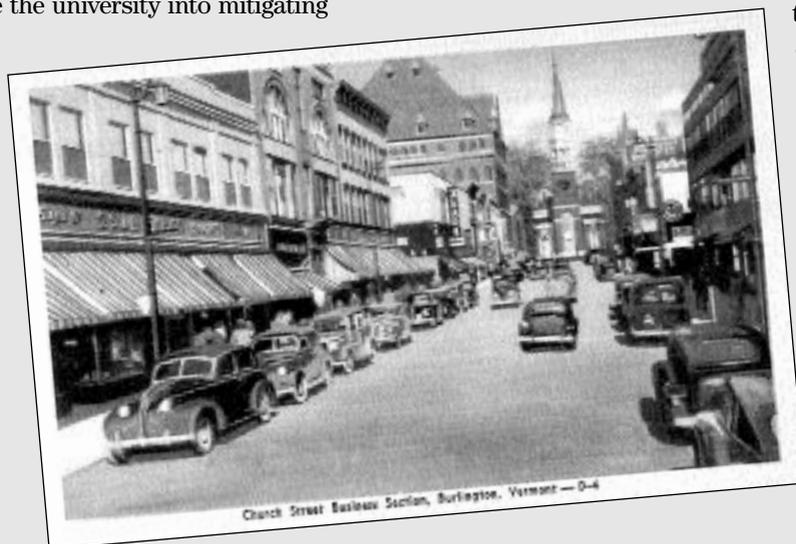
While UVM-city relations have been at times contentious, we've made progress in the recent past. Last year, UVM, under President Judith Ramaley, reached

an agreement with the city that addresses the three most difficult challenges affecting town-gown relations: on-campus housing, off-campus student behavior and UVM's land-use policies.

The university agreed to build on-campus housing for an additional 400 students over and above the

number now residing on

campus. These units, which will be ready for occupancy no later than the fall of 2003, will provide some relief for low- and moderate-income renters, as well as for homeowners who have long complained about the presence of large numbers of students living in homes intended for families. UVM plans to form a partnership with private developers to create apartment-style housing, which will appeal to today's college students.



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In a major change of policy, UVM also agreed to cooperate with the city in dealing with off-campus misconduct by UVM students. The city is establishing protocols to inform UVM of such misconduct. In response to certain violations, UVM will take disciplinary action, and will report annually to the city its responses to off-campus violations of local and state laws. This policy change will be a major deterrent against excessive noise, under-age drinking, public urination and other disturbances that are tearing at the fabric of our downtown neighborhoods.

In response to concerns raised about the university expanding into neighboring residential areas, UVM agreed not to acquire property that lies outside its core academic and residential campuses. At the same time, the city passed a zoning amendment allowing the university to develop its core campus at a higher density and at greater lot coverage than previously permitted.

In addition to these legal agreements, we've maintained and expanded partnerships that address problems at their roots. The Good Neighbor Program, administered jointly by UVM's Office of Government Relations and by the Off-Campus Student Organization, has made strides in enhancing communication among students and their neighbors. Each autumn, program volunteers distribute booklets detailing the rights and responsibilities of students living off campus. During the academic year, the program provides a hotline and conducts outreach to ease neighborhood tensions.

The city's Community Support Program began as a collaborative initiative between UVM and the Burlington Police Department aimed at mediating conflict in neighborhoods with high student populations. The program quickly evolved into a resource for resolving disputes citywide.

We've started to tackle the problem of binge drinking by students and other community members through a university-community partnership funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. This partnership has provided information to students, as well as training for the management and staff of local liquor establishments. The project's educational efforts, in conjunction with coordinated enforcement by Burlington Police and State Liquor Control Inspectors, have begun to make a difference. Downtown rates of various crimes associated with intoxication have plummeted over the last year.

Concurrent with our progress in mitigating negative impacts of a sizable population of students on city neigh-

borhoods, we've taken other significant steps toward town-gown collaboration in a variety of areas.

The city and the university have collaborated on the Lake Champlain Basin Science Center. Opened in 1995, this waterfront-based center aims at educating residents and visitors of all ages about the history, culture and ecology of the Lake Champlain Basin. UVM's new Rubenstein Ecosystem Science Laboratory is an integral part of the center.

And this past summer, when Burlington's Committee on Temporary Shelter asked for help housing as many as 20 homeless families, UVM made an otherwise vacant dormitory available.

In 1998, the university applied for and was awarded \$400,000 in funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of University Partnerships to establish the Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC). The purpose statement of the UVM/Burlington COPC is worth quoting here: "To create effective, reciprocal, sustainable partnerships within UVM and among UVM, the City of Burlington, and residents and organizations of the Old North End (and in surrounding low-income areas). The overall goal, in nurturing such partnerships, is to further the Old North End's physical, economic, social and political development, while advancing the university's mission of service, education and research."

Leveraging more than \$1 million in total staff and service contributions from the university, the city and local nonprofit organizations, COPC funding is supporting efforts to develop community leaders, increase employment and income and promote fair and affordable housing. Ramaley has written that COPC offers the university "a unique opportunity to redefine our working relationship with the City of Burlington." I believe that COPC has already begun to have that effect. We're forging new working partnerships, not just between the administrations of the university and the city, but by involving citizens, businesses, nonprofit and service organizations—our entire community—in the process.

In little more than a decade, town-gown relations in Burlington have been transformed from a contentious standstill to dynamic collaboration. Burlington and UVM still have a way to go. But we've begun to recognize—and to put into practice the recognition—that we'll only get there together.

Peter Clavelle is serving his fifth term as mayor of Burlington, Vt.