



Global Urban Challenges: The Role of Research Universities

Century of the City?

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Last month, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs convened an exciting three-day meeting for 250 scholars from 35 research universities and nearly two dozen countries to explore how the research universities—and the researchers themselves—are tackling a wide array of urban challenges. Broken out into study tracts for the education, health, and urban vitality/sustainability sectors, the researchers shared their current work and looked for synergies, insights, and connections.

The event was notable for its mixed audience—that is, there was a wide array of academic disciplines, a rare experience for the majority of the attendees. Since we need solutions to emerge sooner rather than later to our world’s increasingly complex matrix of problems, cross disciplinary thinking will likely be a critical component of successful mitigation strategies. Many attendees addressed this tension (between specialization and collaboration across disciplines) and spoke in favor of continuing this unusual exchange among scholars and researchers.

While many of the urban challenges facing humanity in the 21st century seem familiar, in a sense they are all newly complex as sheer demographics complicate potential solutions. Policy makers, academics, and citizens of urban centers are confronting the limits of civic knowledge while simultaneously exploring the possibilities of a globally connected world. The Chicago conference offers an interesting benchmark of sorts: with a hopeful agenda of better understanding the issues, along with the possibilities for translating research findings into improved urban policies, the diverse scholars in attendance offered stories, evidence, and lessons to each other.

Many observers argue that cities cannot learn what they need to know from history since, with over half of all humans now living in cities (and more than 80% of Americans), many situations facing urban humanity are new and unique. China already has over 100 cities with more than one million inhabitants in each, and India is heading in the same direction. A critical strategy for progress will be to ‘look side to side’ and for cities to learn from each other.

The sessions on urban vitality I attended offered some interesting contrasts and fascinating examples of work being done to support and enhance sustainability in our cities. Discussion was spirited, and several attendees pointed out that strategies that work well in one place may not necessarily be useful elsewhere since local variability may mean some ideas just don’t translate. On the other hand, knowing that a particular effort has failed in one place doesn’t mean it might not work if tried in another locale—but we can and must learn from each other’s experiences so that at least we don’t make the same mistakes over and over again.

Another critical success strategy is for cities to truly leverage their assets—and a perfect example of this lesson was offered by Mayor Rahm Emanuel when he opened the conference with the story of how he sought to align the city of Chicago’s capital spending with that of Chicago’s three major research universities. Citing data suggesting that the world’s top 100 cities will drive global economic growth, the mayor called the 21st century the “Century of the City” and said that Chicago is developing new international trade and investment mechanisms and relationships such as a new agreement with Mexico City that he called “Sister

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Cities 2.0.” This [Global Cities Economic Partnership](#) will open the door for a range of new initiatives “in trade, innovation, and education to increase employment, expand advanced industries, and strengthen overall global competitiveness.”

Back on the sustainability front, one opportunity for sharing and learning “city to city” (C2C) is provided through the emergence of the [Urban Sustainability Director’s Network](#) which links municipal officials in over 100 cities in North America so they can share knowledge and collaborate on innovative initiatives.

Another exciting development in this area is the recent announcement by the Rockefeller Foundation that they have selected the first 33 cities as part of a “[Resilient Cities Centennial Challenge](#).” These and other cities yet to be selected will receive support from Rockefeller as they develop strategies to increase their capacity to “prepare for, withstand, and bounce back rapidly from shocks and stresses.” The foundation will support a “Chief Resilience Officer” for each city, and provide other support in the form of information networks and other resources to support innovative investment in resilience, which includes sustainability.

As The Chicago Council conference demonstrated, when it comes to tackling urban challenges in education, health, and urban vitality/sustainability, there are many creative, practical approaches being tested throughout academia. It seems to me, based on the panel presentations I heard and the conversations I overheard, that the learning that took place in Chicago last month was not merely academic business as usual: it was instead truly dynamic and engaged in a cross disciplinary way that was as exciting as it was novel. Given the urgency of the problems facing us, we can only hope that as the intellectual ripples from this conference spread out across the scholarly world, our best and brightest minds find both their spirits and their thinking re-energized.



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