UNIVERSITIES AS ANCHOR INSTITUTIONS: A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

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This literature review is a general review, organized by theme, to put into context and assist in analyzing the anchor institutional approaches of The George Washington University. I will first discuss the origins of “anchor institution” and the underlying concepts encompassing the term. Then, I will overview two research approaches in the literature: 1) the views of the community members and 2) the intent and actions of the universities. After, I will outline the contributions from the federal government and think tanks, which provide practical reports and research to the literature. Following is criticism of the “anchor institution mission” by those that claim that anchor institutions prioritize their own interests and act in ways against their supposed missions. Lastly, I will conclude with a discussion of the dearth of research regarding GWU as an anchor institution and propose new research that fills in the gaps in the general literature and in studies of GWU.

“Anchor Institution” as a Term

The term “anchor institution” stems from a Aspen Institute Roundtable paper by Karen Fulbright-Anderson, Andrea Anderson, and Patricia Auspos regarding partnerships between community-based organizations (CBOs) and universities, medical centers, and public utilities. Fulbright-Anderson, Anderson, and Auspos introduced and defined anchor institutions as having “a significant infrastructure investment in a specific community and are therefore unlikely to move out of that community.”¹ The idea that anchor institutions are rooted and non-mobile is the core idea of the term throughout the literature. However, throughout the literature, anchor institutions are generally agreed to be colleges/universities and hospitals/medical centers, or “eds

and meds,” and Fulbright-Anderson, Anderson, and Auspos’s inclusion of public utilities has been dropped.

Historically, large local banks and other for-profit entities could be considered anchor institutions, but Henry S. Webber and Mikael Karlstrom argued that the non-profit institutions’ economic size and inability to move from a neighborhood make them the “promising engines for city and neighborhood redevelopment,” unlike local banks that can be bought or merge and leave the community.²

Eugenie Birch described the current paradigm of how anchor institutions fit in her studied “Downtown of the New American City,” describing them as centrally located in the economic aspects of urban development and revitalization:

The new paradigm for downtown (dense, walkable, mixed use with a heavy component of housing) is quite established in many of the nation’s cities. While this downtown still has considerable commercial activity, its employment base is more diverse, with jobs in anchor institutions (universities; hospitals; and entertainment including arts, culture, and sports) rising as a proportion of the total. The residential component has become significant and is shaping the demand for neighborhood-serving retail, schools, and open space.³

Birch’s defined paradigm considers many aspects of general urbanist ideas, but plants anchor institutions as a core economic generator in a city thriving from mixed use buildings and walkable infrastructure.

**Approach: Community Interviews**

The anchor institution literature starts with Fulbright-Anderson, Anderson, and Auspos’s paper based on interviews with CBO leaders, with the intent of understanding experiences of

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partnerships between CBOs and anchor institutions. Their paper summarized and organized the content of the interviews into general themes and created a general framework of a successful CBO-anchor institution partnership based on the stated experiences of participants. Fulbright-Anderson, Anderson, and Auspos concluded by suggesting that formal structures that engage the institution’s upper management and the expectation of compromise from both sides can help repair relationships and improve the communities involved. These observations form the basis of the beliefs around anchor institutions.

Barbara Ferman and T.L. Hill consciously expanded on Fulbright-Anderson, Anderson, and Auspos’s research with a methodological case study of processes, mechanisms, and relational structures between university-community partnerships. Like Fulbright-Anderson, Anderson, and Auspos, Ferman and Hill focused on the community experience of university-community partnerships. Their study found that differing agendas and incentives creates conflicts between community leaders and university administration and faculty.

**Approach: University-Focused Research**

While Fulbright-Anderson, Anderson, and Auspos and Ferman and Hill wrote notable papers regarding community viewpoints, most work in anchor institution literature focuses on universities’ actions, agendas, and results.

Wim Wiewel and David Broski’s short paper on the University of Illinois-Chicago’s Great Cities program developed the philosophy of why anchor institutions should be involved in community development. They argued that communities no longer “stand in awe” of universities because communities acknowledge “there are many kinds of knowledge, developed

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and held by different sectors of society.”\textsuperscript{5} If universities want to continue their mission of addressing urban issues and filling in gaps from shrinking government funding, Wiewel and Broski argued that universities must choose to work with communities as partners -- not treat them as lab subjects for their expertise.

Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, and John Puckett of *Dewey’s Dream: Universities and Democracies in an Age of Education Reform* split their book in two parts: first, a biography of John Dewey and discussion of his theory of participatory democracy in connection to education reform, and second, a history of the University of Pennsylvania’s implementation of Dewey’s theory in late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In this second half, the authors detailed the need for a third revolution in American schooling that connects to university investment, but they noted that universities need to realign their cultures into becoming civic-minded, rather than investing for their own self-interest. Their conclusions, plus the conclusions of Wiewel and Broski, align with Fulbright-Anderson, Anderson, and Auspos and Ferman and Hill’s statements about partnerships, but go farther to suggest that universities must change their agendas for the good of the areas around them as part of a broader mission for civic equality, not just in response to the demands of the community partners.

Notably different from the previously mentioned research is Webber and Karlstrom’s report through Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, titled “Why Community Investment Is Good for Nonprofit Anchor Institutions.” Webber and Karlstrom detailed the benefits that universities can create for themselves by acting as an anchor institution in their communities. This was a conscious reversal of the earlier literature that focuses on the benefits for the

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
community; instead, this report intended to persuade universities to act as anchor institutions, noting that many universities immediately write off programs as too costly without actually doing a cost-benefit analysis.

Rita Axelroth Hodges and Steve Dubb also focused on the economic strategies of universities as anchor institutions. Their book, *The Road Half-Traveled*, researched the corporate practices of universities in specific, as they saw a gap in the literature. Looking for holistic research on the university, not individual programs, Axelroth Hodges and Dubb visited each school and interviewed administrators and community members regarding general partnerships between diverse types of universities. Based on their observations, they created a typology of how universities economically act with communities: as facilitators, leaders, and conveners. Facilitators have limited resources and choose to use them for educational opportunities, but their resources are often spread thinly. Leaders have lots of monetary resources and use them to develop adjacent areas to their campuses in the interest of its students and faculty, but the community does not have much power in deciding how the resources are used. Conveners have monetary resources, but instead of making decisions for the neighborhood, they create coalitions with residents and CBOs and make investments strategically; often, the neighborhoods in which they invest are not adjacent to the campus. This typology answers the questions of how universities with different economic power approach community development, and through this typology, Axelroth Hodges and Dubb create a compelling definition of the anchor institution mission: “to consciously and strategically apply their long-term, place-based economic power, in combination with their human intellectual resources, to better the welfare of the communities in
which they reside.”

This definition, I feel, succinctly emphasizes the importance of economic contributions from anchor institutions and ties to the needs and wants of community members voiced in Fulbright-Anderson, Anderson, and Auspos’s research; while it is nice to have students volunteer and faculty provide expertise, in the end, having a connection to the financial pipeline is the impetus for communities and CBOs to make true community changes.

**Contributions by the Federal Government and Think Tanks**

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) started the Office of University Partnerships (OUP) in 1994 to expand and promote university-community partnerships based on the belief that universities can foster solutions for local, place-based problems. OUP sponsors grants for minority universities and doctoral dissertations; conferences on anchor institutions and community partnerships; and research reports regarding effective strategies in creating community development.

The Anchor Institutions Task Force, created in 2009 to advise HUD, is an organization composed of higher education institutions coordinated by the University of Pennsylvania, functioning as a think tank that researches the role of institutions in community development. The Task Force has contributed to the literature strongly by providing a comprehensive literature review about anchor institutions, authored by Henry Louis Taylor, Jr. and Gavin Luter. Taylor and Luter wrote the literature review in 2013 to assess what had already been studied in the field so that the Task Force could use the literature effectively in its mission to “leverage the resources of anchor institutions to address urgent social problems and to build democratic, mutually

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beneficial anchor institution-community partnerships.”\(^7\) The literature review, besides being significantly more exhaustive than this one, is most impressive for its long-reaching look into the historical foundations of the concepts that are considered givens in the anchor institution field, such as the belief that university's core mission is a civically-minded mission.

Democracy Collaborative, a nonprofit research institution, promotes ideas that build community wealth. Much of their research and related programs, including the Anchor Dashboard, center around the belief that anchor institutions can be instrumental in creating community wealth and creating equity in economic and democratic processes. Community-Wealth.org, a Democracy Collaborative project, created the Anchor Dashboard and other associated research and tools to help anchor institutions measure the long-term impact of their “anchor mission activities.”\(^8\) Democracy Collaborative adds to the literature by simultaneously creating practical approaches and tools and evaluating the successes in many communities at once.

**Criticism of Anchor Institution Intent and Results**

While Fulbright-Anderson, Anderson, and Auspos and Ferman and Hill find issues with the implementation of partnerships, they both conclude that with more trust, respect, and strong personal relationships, community partnerships can be effective tools and economically benefit the community. The literature generally accepts this positive view of university-community partnerships, but there are researchers that criticize the motives and actual effectiveness of anchor institutions and their partnerships.


Mary-Ellen Boyle and Ira Silver consider the motivations of universities as anchor institutions, focusing on the elite status of the universities and the attempts to protect it. Rather than accepting that universities want to act in the best interest of their surrounding communities, Boyle and Silver tackled the long history of elitism in higher education and the universities’ protection of its ivory tower. They also doubted that university involvement and the vague concept of “community empowerment” is truly crucial to urban revitalization and claimed that a critical eye is needed to reevaluate rather than blindly accept. Boyle and Silver add to the literature by not accepting the pro-university claims of previous articles and studies, and instead show that “self-interested intentions lie behind an altruistic facade.”

Robert Mark Silverman, in much of his recent research, has emphasized that anchor institutions do not always accomplish equity - instead, he shows that universities displace lifelong residents in the name of opportunities for growth, or public school reform ruptures the social fabric of the inner-city neighborhoods. Silverman compares these drastic changes to William Worthy’s concept of “institutional rape,” where communities are disrupted by institutionally driven revitalization efforts, and claims that the economic power that institutions have are publically subsidized by federal funds such as student loans and Medicare/Medicaid benefits and therefore the community should have more control in the anchor institution, rather than the anchor institution acting as a benevolent patron to the community.

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12 Ibid., 23.
The George Washington University as an Anchor Institution

The George Washington University (GWU) has not attracted any research regarding its role as an anchor institution in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood or in the DC area in general. GWU’s emphasis is on service learning and volunteering in many neighborhoods in DC, rather than deep investments in community-based organizations. This role may characterize GWU as a facilitator in Axelroth Hodges and Dubb’s typology, but in general, GWU has not created noteworthy programs or innovative approaches that would inspire further research or case studies.

While there is no methodological research on GW’s role as an anchor institution, Zach Komes, a GWU student and writer for the GW Roosevelt Institute magazine *Omnibus*, proposed that GWU should deepen their relationship as an anchor institution by donating $250,000 to community development banks in DC, such as the City First Bank of Washington, DC or the Industrial Bank. Both of these banks use 60% of their funds for lending or other benefits for low-income communities. Komes argued that this both matches the mission stated by GWU and would be consistent with the actions of its peer institutions such as Georgetown, Tufts, and Duke. In the terms of Axelroth Hodges and Dubb, Komes proposes that GW take a drastic jump from a facilitator to a convenor. While it is not an outrageous proposal -- especially as $250,000 is a one-hundredth of GWU’s current holdings -- Komes does not look at why GWU

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15 Ibid., 8.
16 Ibid., 7.
has not made the choices of its peers or what institutional beliefs may prevent GWU from furthering its role as an anchor institution.

**Conclusion: Filling the Gap**

Drawing from the gaps found in this literature review, the conversation around anchor institutions may proceed by taking a more critical look at the outcomes. After fifteen years of “anchor institution” literature, revealing the ways that anchor institutions fail to or ineffectively contribute to economic development may help develop more nuanced strategies.

Additionally, there is a large gap in discussing the reasons why universities do not create stronger commitments as anchor institutions. Some reasons, such as believing that anchor institution actions cost more than they benefit, are central ideas in Webber and Karlstrom’s report, but a methodological case study may illuminate other reasons or disprove Webber and Karlstrom’s claim. This could possibly be filled with a case study of the institutional structure of GWU, which is barely a “facilitator” in the terminology of Axelroth Hodges and Dubb.
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