

THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

Posted on Sat, Oct. 17, 2009

Editorial: A collegial neighborhood

For decades, universities in urban settings built high fences around their campuses to cloister students and employees from crime and blight. But in recent years many universities have begun to literally and figuratively tear down the walls and embrace their neighbors.

Nowhere has that change been more dramatic than at the University of Pennsylvania, which built a public school and a hotel, and offered incentives to its workers to buy homes around its West Philadelphia campus.

Penn also has made an effort to employ local residents and contract with neighborhood businesses. The effort has helped to stabilize the hardscrabble streets around Penn and made the Ivy League university even more attractive.

Penn is not alone in such efforts. Next door, Drexel University has also become more integrated with its neighborhood. Temple University, and Widener and Rutgers in New Jersey, are likewise taking steps to reach out to their neighbors.

Indeed, a study released Monday ranked Penn first in the country at improving the economic, cultural, and social lives of its urban community. Drexel was ranked 10th, and Rutgers University's Newark campus 23d.

Temple and Widener were among 75 schools named to the "honor roll." The study, "Saviors of Our Cities," was conducted by the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities, a nonprofit association of urban schools.

The effort to improve urban town-gown relations began in the 1990s and has coincided with a surge in the number of students applying to city colleges.

Around the country, many colleges in gritty neighborhoods have taken the lead in working with their urban neighbors. The schools and their neighbors have seen the benefits of working together. To be sure, there are still flashpoints, but the climate is much different from the heated town-gown tensions that existed in the 1960s and 1970s.

"We can't teach liberal arts and across the street is an impoverished neighborhood," said Evan S. Dobbelle, who as president of Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., received praise for his efforts to better integrate the liberal arts school with its largely Latino neighborhood.

Penn was recognized mainly for its collaboration with local public schools. Its service learning initiatives and neighborhood development were cited as well.

As the city's largest private employer, Penn has the ability to be a major force in the city. In return, a thriving Philadelphia benefits the university. That's what makes for a win-win.