



## AIA Best Practices: 10 ways universities can become good neighbors

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### Summary

The authors developed 10 principles of community partnering from their experience in creating partnerships and completing projects at the University of Cincinnati, where they worked together for 15 years.

### Build Relationships

Two groups that traditionally do not work together to plan their future are university campus representatives and the citizens of residential communities that surround the campuses. This insularity can often lead to conflict, especially if a campus expands over time.

The following set of principles suggests a new way to approach institutional and community development to achieve important strategic outcomes for the institution, its immediate community, and the greater region.

Too often, a university's community relations staff just shows up at community meetings to brief those in attendance about events and issues on campus. Although there is nothing wrong with this one-way communication process, it limits the development of an open relationship with the community and those concerned with the campus's future development. Future development can have an impact on a neighborhood's long-term residents by affecting traffic congestion, aging housing stock, or inappropriate commercial development.

A well-developed relationship with the community can help address the strategic needs of the area and focus on economic health around the edges of a campus as a basic requirement for the health of the university itself. To create a productive partnership between the campus and surrounding neighborhoods, it is important to follow principles that ensure the relationship will benefit all parties.

**1. Contextual**—Do not expand into a neighborhood if doing so will destroy the area's fabric. If, for example, a business district lies on the edge of the campus, improve it rather than take it over for direct university functions. In fact, some university functions can be integrated into a business district by becoming tenants. The same principle applies to nearby housing areas; the availability of attractive housing can help recruit major faculty. Be clear about the institution's boundaries and the pressure to expand, if present. Gaining the trust of your partners and working together with them is essential to finding options for expansion.

**2. Mutual benefit**—Give equal weight and attention to institutional and community goals. Community organizations around a university are not accustomed to having a serious place in the planning process; they

will assume that the university will dominate the agenda concerning its needs. Thus, it will take serious effort and a strategic process to allow the community organization(s) to reveal its goals for them to be addressed by all. For example, a project that included student housing over a garage on the campus edge also provided a great opportunity for 50,000 square feet of new retail space. All partners accepted the combined program, and the project was built with separate ownership of the various resulting layers.

**3. Local representation**—The community partners need to be the recognized community governance organization, not just interested or active individuals. It is important to acknowledge the role of the official community organization and/or business association. Thus, if the leadership of that organization is unwilling to join a partnership, and others want to do so, ask them to become involved with the official organization and become a part of its leadership. Then, you can partner with them. It is very important not to go around an organization in this process. It will hamper the resulting planning and make discussion with the city very awkward.

**4. Local control**—In many cases, the neighborhood representatives should have voting control of the nonprofit development corporation, even though the institution sits on the board. Since the goal here is to find a common agenda and plan, and then to execute projects that serve that agenda, the community board members must be able to tell their constituents they can control the agenda through voting power. If the search for a common agenda succeeds, they will not use that power to stop projects. But they need to believe, especially at the beginning of the relationship, that they can vote to slow down or stop something until it meets their needs as well.

**5. Flexibility regarding space control**—Be willing to waive direct ownership and operation of facilities in favor of a leasehold relationship in a mixed-use project. In some cases, institutional expansion goals may be best achieved through a contract, lease, or partnership with private entities in surrounding neighborhoods. Across from the University of Cincinnati Medical Center, for example, one of the community development partners constructed a 60,000-square-foot swing space building (with below grade parking) as a part of a four-block development that includes new apartment buildings and condominiums. The university is a 25-year tenant in the building, which also includes 15,000 square feet of retail space at the ground level (a major goal of the community development corporation). As a result of using a single developer, all components of the four-block development share a common design and urban design approach.

**6. Reuse of existing, underutilized non-residential assets**—Look for opportunities to recycle empty space in the area that's deteriorating and needs a new use, even if it is not contiguous to the main campus. The facilities fallout from mergers and acquisitions, or just the passage of the decades, often leaves hospitals, factories, and corporate campuses boarded up. Reusing them for institutional purposes is not only responsible land use, it also preserves neighborhoods near campus. This strategy can serve as an economical way to expand a program, as the entry costs for these empty spaces are often lower than those immediately contiguous to campus. As an example, a former corporate pharmaceutical laboratory campus eight miles from the University of Cincinnati was closed after three global mergers in that industry. Donated to the university and renovated into the Genome Research Institute for \$40 million, it is a \$200 million asset that incurred only \$40 million in costs. The College of Medicine occupants are very happy, and the small city in which this facility is located has been very supportive of the infrastructure improvements.

**7. Neighborhood identity**—Recognize that each neighborhood is different and prepare to form multiple partnerships and development corporations to pursue the common agenda with each one. All campuses have several edges, and it is not appropriate to assume each of the neighborhoods on those edges have a common agenda. Often, the mix of residential and commercial use is different, or the level of penetration of student housing is different. Thus, one large development entity for the whole district is often not the appropriate approach. At the University of Cincinnati, there were six different neighborhood development corporations formed to respond to this issue. This separation allows the governance of each corporation to be composed of the right mix of community or business leaders, who can stay focused on the local issues. Only district-wide issues that are identified, such as transportation planning, image building, and way-finding systems need to be addressed by forming a council of representatives from the individual development organizations.

**8. Community building**—Establish and support an employee-assisted housing program to increase the number of owner-occupied housing units near campus. The strongest signal of community health is an increase in the university's employees who want to live very near campus. The program should provide meaningful incentives, such as assistance with down payments and mortgage costs, and should be forgivable if the resident remains in the home for five years. Ensure that your plan covers all income levels, for faculty as well as non-faculty positions.

**9. City relationship**—Resolve differences before going to the city. The city is neither a good initiator nor a good arbitrator. Neighborhoods have historically tried to use the city as a defense against institutional intrusion, a strategy that has often resulted in weak city support for a neighborhood's own goals. But when presented with a consensus plan developed by the institution and the neighborhoods in advance, the city will react with more urgency to things like zoning requests, land acquisitions, and tax abatements.

**10. City support requests**—Make realistic requests of the city, especially for financial support. Cities, like all governments, have fewer resources to work with and larger problems to solve than they did 20 or 30 years ago. That includes federal development funds that are passed through cities for administration. Thus, you need to have realistic project funding requests that can be supported by your program officers. Requests in the 5–10 % range as a gap filler will generate a realistic response, while larger requests will fall on deaf ears. That is why a local source of capital is often needed to fill gaps above 10 %. Non-financial requests of the city can be very aggressive, for things like zoning, street improvements, and the contribution of any publicly owned land that is in the project scope.

These principles are designed to change the culture of neighborhood relations with the communities that surround higher education institutions. Only true collaboration can produce win-win scenarios that improve the health and vitality of the community and institution.

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