On October 13, 2017, Yale University and the City of New Haven, Connecticut, co-hosted the conference, “Forging University-Municipality Partnerships Toward Urban Sustainability,” to explore ways in which universities and their host cities are working together on sustainability projects and programs. Cities are epicenters of opportunity—where the transfer of goods and ideas allows people to obtain social, economic, and political power. With Earth’s urban population rapidly increasing, university-municipal partnerships are an optimal pathway to create policy and infrastructure that reflect principles of sustainable development. This conference, organized by the Yale Hixon Center for Urban Ecology and the Yale Office of Sustainability, brought together 29 speakers from cities across the United States and Canada to share their city-university, or “town-gown,” partnership experiences in the areas of stormwater and flood management, transportation, and climate action. These city-university panelist groups discussed how they created successful partnerships and how their successes and lessons could be applied more broadly.

The genesis of these partnerships is often overlooked by stakeholders hoping to implement new projects because procedural information is not always highlighted in project reporting. This report showcases the town-gown partnerships presented at the conference through the lens of these key procedural themes. For each key theme, the report identifies several exemplary partnerships to demonstrate how, despite differences, there are shared lessons learned. This report highlights the diversity of these partnerships and how universities and cities can collaborate to enhance urban sustainability.

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The conference began with a panel consisting of city and university leadership: Toni Harp, Mayor of New Haven, Connecticut; Peter Salovey, President of Yale University; Paul Soglin, Mayor of Madison, Wisconsin; and, Charles Hoslet, Vice Chancellor for University Relations at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The panel was moderated by Indy Burke, Dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies.

The leadership panel focused on the importance of town-gown partnerships for both the university and city community, especially around issues of sustainability and climate change. Panelists highlighted the need for clear communication between stakeholders, the importance of being a good neighbor, and the mutual benefits that can be gained when these partnerships are successful and sustained. As Mayor Soglin stated at the beginning of his remarks, “you cannot get to sustainability until you achieve the proper relationship between the town and the gown.” Mayor Harp and President Salovey expressed their commitment to working together to address climate issues in New Haven, especially given the city’s coastal perch and the increasing threat of severe storms and rising sea levels. They both emphasized the importance of collaboration between cities and universities. Rather, each pair of representatives at the conference built a relationship to address its communities’ specific needs.

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Both examples demonstrate how committed city and university leadership can create a town-gown partnership that goes beyond a single project and instead becomes a framework for many projects. As commented by Dean Burke, “there is enormous potential for cities to be sites of creativity, economic development, and social and community wellbeing.” Certainly, committed leadership at the city and the university can move town-gown partnerships toward achieving this potential.

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**Establishing a Partnership**

“It just takes two” to form a partnership. Representatives within each partnership discussed a spectrum of participant interactions, ranging from a small group of passionate individuals to fully institutionalized components of a university or city. Each of the presentations showed that success is not dependent on size or funding, but on building committed relationships.

The partnership developed between the City of Birmingham and the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) exemplifies how a successful partnership can be the result of two people’s desire to solve an issue that was negatively impacting the community. The city stormwater specialist reached out to a UAB professor for assistance with failing stormwater inlet lids, and the two have been working together to test different models to identify an inlet lid that will offer the best design to effectively serve the needs of the community.

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can we do it with less cost, more efficiently? After working with community members and the statewide transit agency, the streetcar project transformed to an enhanced bus and bike share project. The bus system that is now placed in place of the streetcar project will serve a greater segment of Providence’s community with a budget that is one-seventh of the capital cost of the proposed streetcar project. The city, the transit agency, and Brown have simultaneously been working to develop a bikeshare program that will complement the enhanced bus project, to be implemented in summer 2018.

Formal Agreements

In many cases highlighted at the conference, formal agreements were a helpful tool to build a successful partnership, as they offer a secure pathway for developing short- and long-term projects. Formal agreements help to build leadership support and relay a heightened level of commitment to the partnership, thereby encouraging increased involvement by university and city personnel as well as the host community. Formal agreements can be designed in many ways; however, the most common one used and presented by panelists was a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between a city and university. The City of Vancouver and University of British Columbia signed an MOU in 2010 that enables the city and UBC to work together on the goal of being the greenest city in the world by 2020. Another example of a formal agreement that has benefited partnership development is the Cambridge Compact for a Sustainable Future. In 2013, the presidents of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University joined the mayor of Cambridge to sign a written declaration jointly recognizing that climate change is a crisis. All three entities formally committed to working on this issue together. The panelists representing MIT and the city felt that the Cambridge Compact provided a foundation for additional projects as well as leadership support for collaboration.

The Madison Metro town-gown partnership between the City of Madison and the University of Wisconsin-Madison displays another formal agreement that helped foster a sustainable partnership. Over 25 years ago, the city and university established a Transit Service Agreement that aligned services through the university campus and the city. By combining bus services, students, staff, faculty, and community residents have fully embraced Metro.
Transit as a transportation system. The Transit Service Agreement establishes a unique pass system that controls cost. This cost-sharing agreement took eighteen months to negotiate, but has allowed the intricacies of funding, service, and project planning to be coordinated effectively.

Funding

Project funding is a primary concern for all town-gown partners. Governments, universities, and foundations were highlighted as traditional sources for project financing. Even with contributions from these sources, it is often necessary for cities and universities to pursue alternative methods of funding to supplement or substitute traditional funding structures.

The unique business model and funding structure that the City of Madison and University of Wisconsin-Madison developed a partnership to operate Madison Metro Transit, a popular bus system with high ridership. As a space-constrained city with limited parking, buses have become an important mobility mode. Madison Metro has invested in bus transit by constructing sheltered bus stops, launching a fleet of hybrid-electric buses, and extending service boundaries throughout Madison. Madison Metro has also developed plans to construct a satellite garage and maintenance facility.

Government agencies can also provide funding to city-university projects. The University of Colorado Boulder (CU Boulder) and City of Boulder resilient microgrid project is being financed through a partnership with the National Renewable Energy Laboratory. They are working together to design, build, and operate a microgrid system that will power adjacent buildings and ultimately connect to CU Boulder’s existing microgrid. The funding partners are also working together to evaluate how this microgrid will help make the campus and city more resilient during power outages.

Similarly, the University of Wisconsin (UW) and City of Madison combined forces to ensure that service operations remain funded for the Madison Metro Transit. Students are charged a fee with their tuition to fund the bus pass program, and the university uses campus parking fees to fund university bus service. Together with funds from the city, Madison Metro Transit is available to residents of Madison and the UW community as a joint bus system. In addition to these sources, the city and university jointly applied for a federal Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant to fund infrastructure improvements. The university campus has a parking space for only one in every eight people, necessitating alternatives to automobile use for commuters. Following a long-term trend of increased bus ridership, there has been a recent decline due to overcrowding and artificially low gas prices. The city plans to build a new electric-powered bus facility that will increase bus capacity, centralize maintenance, and eventually meet passenger demand for additional service routes.

The City of Providence has also leveraged federal funds to increase the number of people using sustainable modes of transportation. The city obtained a $1.3 Million TIGER grant for a streetcar system that was abandoned, but was able to repurpose a portion of the grant for bus shelters and infrastructure for a bike sharing program. This public-private partnership with Social Bicycles, a company that provides 15,000 bikes across 40 markets worldwide, will provide the community with a fleet of 400 bicycles to expand mobility options around the city including from Brown’s main campus to locations downtown and the medical campus. The city has also committed to installing $10 million in high-quality bike infrastructure over the next few years.

Similarly, Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) utilizes funding from a range of university endowments and foundation funding to support projects in Pittsburgh. A portion of funds from the Richard King Mellon Foundation was set aside by the founder of the university for CMU programs that assist Pittsburgh. The city is a member of the 100 Resilient Cities program; it contributes the money received from the Rockefeller Foundation for that program to implement projects with CMU.

The City of Boulder and the University of Colorado Boulder are collaborating on multiple projects that build community resilience. They are currently working on a microgrid project that will expand the university’s 13-megawatt microgrid to increase energy resilience and reliability and support the aim of ensuring the mission of the university can go on in a changing climate. The city and the university have a deeply embedded fabric of sustainability that frames their work and long-standing relationship. They are working together with a goal to be a leader in sustainability and resilience.

Funding from private foundations has also provided town-gown partners with the necessary means to implement their projects. The Great Lakes Integrated Sciences & Assessments (GLISA) program is a partnership between University of Michigan and Michigan State University; GLISA is a broker of climate information and helps cities produce a framework to make informed decisions to adapt to climate change. GLISA is broadly supported by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, while several of its specific initiatives obtain funding from other sources in the private sector. For example, the Great Lakes Adaptation Assessment for Cities initiative was jointly funded by the Kresge Foundation and the University of Michigan Graham Sustainability Institute, which provided the City of Ann Arbor with funding to assess the impacts of climate change in the region.

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The City and the university have a deeply embedded standing relationship. They are working together with a 32-megawatt microgrid to increase energy resilience and reliability and support the aim of ensuring the mission of the university can go on in a changing climate. The city and the university have a deeply embedded fabric of sustainability that frames their work and long-standing relationship. They are working together with a goal to be a leader in sustainability and resilience.

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**MUTUAL BENEFITS**

Town-gown partnerships are successfully sustained when there are benefits for all actors. In turn, mutually beneficial collaboration can bring data and technical capabilities together and leverage the expertise of partners.

**Technical Expertise**

The University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) and City of Birmingham both benefited from their stormwater inlet project by capitalizing on each other’s complementary strengths. The city was able to utilize UAB’s engineering expertise and design capabilities to create a durable inlet lid that met the needs of the city and community and that utilized local manufacturing and recycled waste (as seen below). UAB was able to use this project as a real-world opportunity for students, allowing them to work on a project that impacts their local community.

For this project, the city and university are collaborating with the National Renewable Energy Laboratory on the technical components but are also working to involve researchers and other interested stakeholders. Representatives from both the city and the university are writing letters of support for a faculty member’s research proposal that will incorporate the microgrid.

**Data Sharing**

Cities and universities can both benefit from data and analysis exchanges. Frequently, cities do not have sufficient capacity for advanced data analysis, and researchers are often looking to analyze city data. An exchange of resources can be mutually beneficial for both parties, as highlighted by many panelists throughout the conference.

The University of Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance utilized the data collected by the City of Baltimore for its Vital Signs Indicator analysis. In partnership with the Alliance, the city created a comprehensive Watershed 263 project which increased the effectiveness of stormwater project planning and implementation. Citizens of Baltimore also benefited from this exchange, as they are able to use this analysis to prioritize sites for stormwater infrastructure.

Similarly, Vancouver’s partnership with UBC provides a unique professional development opportunity for the students, while at the same time the city receives an influx of excited, passionate thinkers who want to contribute to Vancouver’s sustainability and climate goals. Since its inception, 27 former Greenest City Scholars have been hired by the city and continue to strengthen the link with the university.

The University of Colorado Boulder and City of Boulder resilient microgrid project serves as another example of mutual benefits of a healthy town-gown relationship. Both the city and the university recognize the importance of partnerships and the benefits they can provide to the community with different actors bringing distinct skills.

The City of Birmingham and the University of Alabama at Birmingham Neighborhood Indicators Alliance started working together in 2000 after a multi-year/multi-stakeholder planning process which ultimately created the Watershed 263 Project in 2004. This partnership was initiated because the city had a federal requirement and desire to increase city water quality by better managing stormwater runoff for its communities, and the university had an interest in growing its Vital Signs project to incorporate more indicators and to improve community spaces throughout the city. The project has led to increased tree cover and permeable soils, cleaner vacant lots, and has generally improved the sustainability of local communities.

**Equity**

Equity is at the core of all successful town-gown partnerships. City-university partners should seek involvement from a diverse range of stakeholders and work to establish respect among collaborators. The most successful partnerships leverage community input throughout program planning, development, and implementation. It can take a significant amount of time to build mutual respect between stakeholders, but it is important that all parties are actively working on building a positive interdependence.

Over a quarter of South Bend, Indiana’s population lives below the federal poverty line, which has made equity an integral part of their town-gown partnership with the University of Notre Dame. Historically, the university and city had a disconnected relationship—faculty and students rarely interacted with residents of South Bend. However, this trend has shifted as Notre Dame has begun working with the city to pilot new technologies and plan more inclusive public spaces. As a result of this partnership, South Bend is one of the first cities in the United States to install a smart sewer system, which was developed by Notre Dame faculty. Moreover, the city and university have combined forces to revitalize Seitz Park, which is a popular community space for special events and community gatherings.

Additional examples of the importance of data sharing came from Minneapolis and Providence. The City of Minneapolis has an ongoing partnership with the Humphrey School of Public Affairs and the Minnesota Traffic Observatory to evaluate bikeway projects. Providence made use of pedestrian and bicycle trip data to inform effective transit planning.
Social equity is a key component of urban resilience. The City of Baltimore’s partnership with the University of Baltimore began with a multi-step process that first asked community members where change was needed, and then used a tool developed by the university’s Neighborhood Indicators Alliance to identify priorities in areas such as stormwater management. Ultimately, this project will increase equity by creating greater community awareness and stewardship, improving water quality and environmental conditions, and enhancing community parks and open spaces.

Pittsburgh has also leveraged its partnership with Carnegie Mellon University to create more connections between the university and city communities through the MetroLab and Metro21 programs. As Anna Siekien, Associate Director for Innovation and Strategic Partnerships at CMU’s Wilton E. Scott Institute for Energy Innovation notes, “Each Metro21 project addresses the “four Ps” of project development—people, place, planet, and performance—and utilizes associated metrics to determine project effectiveness. These projects all include a public engagement component to ensure they fit the needs of Pittsburgh citizens.

The City of Madison and University of Wisconsin-Madison also consider issues of equity within their region. As a city-owned transit system, Metro Transit has not had the means to serve the periphery of Madison and its outer suburbs, despite many requests from these communities. In Madison, people of color and socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals often live on the outer limits of the city; Madison Metro Transit has recognized that a lack of bus service has prevented people in these communities from reaching jobs and other resources. Metro Transit sees value in working with the state legislature and private sector to address mobility in these communities. Shifting from a city-owned transit system to a regional transit authority has the potential to greatly extend service to underrepresented communities.

The City of South Bend and the University of Notre Dame have partnered on a hydroelectric generation project that will be operated by the university on the city-owned dam. The new hydroelectric generation facility is being financed by the university, and is expected to generate 2.25 megawatts of energy for the university (approximately 7 percent of the university load) and offset 11,710 megatons of carbon dioxide. As a part of the lease from the city, the university will pay $1 million for restoration of Seitz Park. This partnership allowed a long-underutilized city asset to be developed into a clean energy producer for the university and supported the reimagining of a community focal point.

The City of Minneapolis and University of Minnesota found that collaborating on bike infrastructure improvement projects has produced a city more conducive to cycling, despite the frigid winters. Campus parking revenues of around $40 million per year go toward funding sustainable transportation projects, such as the Dinkytown Greenway that stretches from downtown to the University of Minnesota campuses. Improvements to bike corridors have involved the university, city, and other government agencies. These partnerships have also facilitated the approval process for a new 2.6 mile protected bike lane, planned for 2019.

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CLOSING REMARKS

Dr. Murali Chandrashekar, Vice Provost, International Affairs at the University of British Columbia, summarized outcomes from the day and shared thoughts on why university-municipal partnerships matter. He identified several of the key themes presented above and proposed the idea of “patient urgency” in forming partnerships to enhance urban sustainability. In closing, Dr. Chandrashekar called on the audience to consider, “how do you go from today’s problems to tomorrow’s future scenarios? How can lessons be shared between Ann Arbor to Accra, Boulder to Bangkok, Cambridge to Chennai, and back again?” With the hope of bridging the knowledge gap to enable effective town-gown partnerships, this conference showcased exemplary projects and replicable town-gown processes that have the potential to facilitate the development of meaningful partnerships worldwide.

There were several initiatives discussed during the conference that have set out to facilitate this sharing of information. As was discussed above, the MetroLab partnership brings together over thirty town-gown partnerships that are focused on sharing and creating innovative solutions to challenges surrounding metro areas throughout the United States. Additionally, organizations such as the Global Network for Advanced Management and the Urban Sustainability Directors Network also convene universities and cities, respectively, around the pressing issues that impact global communities.

The Tsai Center for Innovative Thinking at Yale (CITY) Net-Zero Action Group is a new initiative that strives to connect university students with local and global communities to tackle net-zero projects using innovative ideas and partnerships. During the conference, the Net-Zero Action Group asked audience members to react and engage in the conference topic areas through a series of breakout sessions and held an Action Social at the close of the conference. The Action Social was designed to connect community leaders and students to spur innovative partnerships and ideas surrounding net-zero and town-gown relationships. In the coming months, the Tsai CITY Net-Zero Action Group will work with these newly formed partnerships to create projects focusing on how net-zero activities can be incorporated into town-gown relationships.

As more communities discover the benefits of university-municipality partnerships, it will become easier for others to emulate the processes of collaboration that lead to positive change. Communities of the future will be challenged with climate change, stormwater management, and transportation issues, but these partnerships offer a pathway to explore innovative approaches and identify solutions. Cities and universities can work together to ensure the long-term resilience of their shared communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

On behalf of the Yale Hixon Center for Urban Ecology and the Office of Sustainability, Colleen Murphy-Dunning and Brianne Mullenn thank the City of New Haven for co-convening this conference, which was a town-gown partnership in itself, and would not have been possible without the support of Mayor Toni Harp, Doug Hausladen, Giovannì Zinn, Dawn Henning, and Laurence Grotheer. We also thank Mayor Harp, along with Yale University President Peter Salovey, Mayor Paul Soglin of Madison, and Vice Chancellor Charles Hoslet of the University of Wisconsin-Madison for speaking on and demonstrating the importance of leadership in supporting successful town-gown partnerships. This conference was shaped with the valuable input and support of Yale faculty and staff including Gaboury Benoit, Brad Gentry, Karen Sore, Ginger Chapman, and Melissa Goodall. Finally, we thank the cities and universities and their representatives for their dedication to these successful partnerships toward urban sustainability: Brian Abbanat, City of Davis; Brad Badele, City of Vancouver; Simon Blenski, City of Minneapolis; John Bolduc, City of Cambridge; Drey Cooper, City of Birmingham; Al Dahlberg, Brown University; Therese Dorau, City of South Bend; Grant Ervin, City of Pittsburgh; Jeff Plym, University of California-Davis; Brian Goldberg, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Kim Grove, City of Baltimore; Martina Haggerty, City of Providence; Nancy Jones, University of Baltimore; Jenna Jorns, University of Michigan; Charles Kamp, City of Madison; David Kang, University of Colorado-Boulder; Rob Kennedy, University of Wisconsin-Madison; Jonathan Koehn, City of Boulder; Matt Naud, City of Ann Arbor; Brian Pillay, University of Alabama at Birmingham; Steve Sanders, University of Minnesota; Anna Siekien, Carnegie Mellon University; and, Victoria Smith, University of British Columbia.

WHAT’S NEXT?

There was a sense throughout the conference that universities and cities should not only be working with and sharing ideas within their own town-gown partnerships, but that they should also reach out and connect with others. By learning from other partnerships, cities and universities can implement best practices from the start of a project, allowing for streamlined planning processes and efficient use of resources.

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