Universities and Sustainable Cities & Communities
Responsibilities in the Neo-Liberal Era

James R. Dunn, Ph.D.
Associate Vice-President, Research (Acting), McMaster University
Senator William McMaster Chair in Urban Health Equity
Professor & Chair, Dept. of Health, Aging & Society, McMaster University
Director, McMaster Institute for Health Equity
@UrbanHealthProf
Universities & Cities: History

• Universities: important civic purpose for cities
• Civic leaders in Hamilton enticed McMaster University to move from Toronto in 1930
• A university, by their logic, was critical to civic life and to elevate the city’s reputation
• An academic institution was also needed to complement the industrial base of Hamilton
• Hamilton has had a strong ‘town and gown’ divide’, however
Universities & Cities: Transitions

- Successive waves of global change have transformed universities since 1930
- Depression, baby boom, de-industrialization, knowledge economy, neo-liberalism, etc...
- Gender equity, immigration, ethno-racial diversity, globalization, technology, etc..
- *Still require a focus on how universities can redress societal inequity in material well-being*
A Fundamental Responsibility: Equity in Material Well-Being

“How can universities, in an era of growing disparities in social, economic and health outcomes, redress inequities in the material well-being of populations locally and globally in the neo-liberal era?”
Sustainable Cities & Communities: University Responsibilities

Universities, through their operation, have opportunities and obligations as:

- Educational service providers
- Employers and economic drivers
- Landholders and property developers
- Environmental stewards
- Civic and community leaders

Actions in all of these areas have aggregate and differential equity impacts
City Material Social Equity: The Case of McMaster & Hamilton

- Hamilton (pop. 536,000) has transitioned from industrial to service economy: ‘meds & eds’
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• Common hallmarks of urban industrial-service economic transition seen in Hamilton
  • ‘Hollowing out’ of downtown core / suburbanization
  • Low-wage, service sector jobs
  • Low unemployment, but low labour force participation
  • Severe socio-economic disparities by geography

• Hamilton Spectator’s ‘Code Red’ series documents disparities in health terms
Universities as Educational Service Providers

• Code Red patterns became major community imperative, leading to significant mobilization

• Key issue: distribution of material resources
  • What services / resources does an institution have that could improve the material well-being of marginalized populations?

• McMaster and other institutions trying to reduce barriers to post-secondary education

• Research can have an impact – risks though
Universities as Employers & Economic Drivers

• Universities increasingly important to the economic base of their cities
  • Employment & workforce development
  • Business accelerator (commercialization activities)
  • Purchaser (procurement)

• Conditions of the city should govern priorities
  • in Hamilton, human capital development, labour force attachment, living wage, social procurement are foci

• Social procurement leverages purchasing to achieve public good – env’t, social equity, etc.
Universities as Landholders & Developers

- Land critical to universities, but urban settings a “special challenge” for universities
  - Externalities & income transfers via land markets

- Harvey (2019) distinguishes three ‘cities’:
  - The city of use value (non-rent-seeking property use)
  - The city of exchange value (property as revenue source)
  - The city of speculative gain (property as speculative investment)

  - Transparency and Reciprocity – operational principles
  - Efficiency, Legitimacy, Fairness – ethical norms
David Braley Health Sciences Centre
Universities as Environmental Stewards

• Energy efficiency
• Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions
  • Buildings
  • Transportation (workforce, students)
• Minimization of waste
• Responsible investment of funds
• Protection and enhancement of natural lands
• Recreational / educational use of natural lands
  • President’s Advisory Committee on Natural Lands
Universities as Civic and Community Leaders

- Universities occupy a unique place in the landscape of a city’s civic leadership
- Academic freedom, research capacity and reputation for balanced analysis are assets
- Universities can and should take leadership in strategic action to address local city needs
  - But must go well beyond ‘research transfer’
  - Leverage existing resources / services for public good
- Hamilton Anchor Institutions Leadership (HAIL)
  - One local example of such an initiative
Key Urban Equity Challenges: University Responsibilities

- Development & human capital over lifecourse
- Labour force attachment & well-being
- Threats to housing affordability
- Vulnerable, high users of services
  - Severe & persistent mental illness, addictions
  - Older adults with frailties, functional limitations
- Supporting immigrants & refugees
- Environmental impacts of university ops
Thank You