

**PRESIDENTIAL  
PERSPECTIVES**



a higher education presidential thought leadership series

2009/2010 SERIES: **LEADERSHIP IN THE GREAT RECESSION**

CHAPTER SIX

# **GROWING A UNIVERSITY IN A SHRINKING CITY**

# Growing a University in a Shrinking City

Dr. David Sweet: President, Youngstown State University

---

Managing the complicated relationship between a university and the city it calls home can be one of the toughest challenges a university president faces. If the city in question is like Youngstown, Ohio—an urban center struggling with above-average unemployment rates, chronic poverty, blighted neighborhoods, a declining population, a dwindling tax base to match, and a poor national image—that relationship can be even more difficult to navigate. As described in this essay; however, leadership, partnerships, collaborative planning, and, of greatest importance, a commitment to implement plans, can lead to major progress for both the university and the city.

## Waiting for the Future

On September 19, 1977, Youngstown Sheet and Tube, one of the city's oldest and largest employers, closed permanently. This event, known locally as Black Monday, set off a wave of mill closings that resulted in the loss of 40,000 jobs and the destruction of the Youngstown region's historic economic base: iron and steel. During the next two decades, Youngstown and Youngstown State University (YSU) struggled to recover from the profound impact of this economic tsunami.

Twenty-two years later, in 1999, the Harwood Group characterized Youngstown's civic attitudes in a study prepared for the Mott Foundation to examine attitudes in Youngstown and two other mid-size cities: Flint and Chattanooga. Harwood described Youngstown as *still waiting for the future*. No longer certain of its economic purpose and civic identity; Youngstown was waiting for leadership in order to move forward.

---

I became convinced of the critical role a university can play in forming partnerships.

---

In 1999, Youngstown State University also faced significant challenges. Most critical among these challenges were a decade of enrollment decline and a lack of diversity in both the faculty and the student body. The North Central Association had raised serious concerns about these issues in its 10-year accreditation review (1998). Both the question of community leadership and the accreditation issues were in the forefront when the University's Board of Trustees began a search for new leadership in 1999, and they were among the most pressing issues I faced upon becoming president in July 2000.

Every university president provides leadership in addressing issues of accreditation, enrollment, finance and budget management, campus development, academic planning, and student services. Presidents of universities located in cities face an additional challenge: forming partnerships with city leaders and other external stakeholders whose action—or inaction—will have an impact on the success of the university's plans.

## The Sum of Our Experiences

Prior to becoming a university president, I had followed a somewhat nontraditional career path: beginning at a research institute and becoming head of the regional economics and development unit, moving into government as director of the state department of development (which included the state planning office), and then serving as commissioner of the state public utilities commission. After completing eight years in leadership positions in state government, I took my first full-time academic appointment as founding dean of the College of Urban Affairs at Cleveland State University in 1978. During my 22-year tenure, the College developed nationally recognized programs in planning, public administration, and urban studies. I learned to work with city officials and became convinced of the critical role a university can play in forming partnerships—especially with its mayor and its city planning and economic development directors—that benefit both the city and the university.

I had become interested in city planning as a graduate student at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, taking courses in the Department of City and Regional Planning while completing a master's degree in economic geography. Through this coursework, the writings of architect/planner Daniel Burnham had a lasting impact on my future planning initiatives. Burnham wrote:

“Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood and probably will themselves not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will not die.”

It also was during this time that I became familiar with the work of planner/real estate developer James Rouse, who in the 1960s was a pioneer in the new community's movement. Rouse was an advocate for community leaders to develop a vision for their city's future:

“By building an image of the possible, we not only leap over a lot of roadblocks that would defeat us, we also generate a whole new constituency of people who want to see that image realized.”

---

Early in my tenure as dean, I met Hunter Morrison, who became Cleveland planning director for newly elected Mayor George Voinovich, who took office in 1980. At about the same time, the college had appointed Paul R. Porter as a visiting scholar. A retired diplomat and major contributor to the Marshall Plan, Porter had authored *The Recovery of American Cities*, drawing on principles from the Marshall Plan. Porter, Morrison, and I began exploring ways to spur discussion on the recovery of Cleveland. As a first step, the city, University, and daily newspaper partnered in convening a Cities Congress on Roads to Recovery, at which 49 cities from across the country that had experienced declining population came together and shared their success stories.

We invited Jim Rouse to serve as the keynote speaker. During his remarks to more than 300 business and civic leaders, he stated that all cities confront daily challenges—the trials and tribulations of modern urban America. However, he noted that for a city to redevelop and prosper, at some point civic leaders must step back and look to the future and develop a comprehensive plan for the city's future, **a vision** of the city's future. He quickly added that the leaders must then demonstrate **the will** to implement the plan.

Soon after Rouse's speech, Mayor Voinovich convened Cleveland's civic leadership to prepare Cleveland's Civic Vision. He asked the University to partner with city staff in developing this plan. Completed in 1989, the Civic Vision plan has guided the redevelopment of Cleveland's downtown and its neighborhoods. Looking back, it is clear that the key to success of the plan has been Cleveland's leaders demonstrating the will to implement their civic vision.

## Experiences Applied

In assuming a presidency, we each bring the sum of our experiences to address the challenges of leading our university. Once in Youngstown, I became acutely aware that my past experience in forging a strong partnership between the city and the university would be critical to success in my new role. To forge this partnership, I drew on the words of Burnham and Rouse and the lessons of collaboration learned from the Cleveland Civic Vision process.

Early in my YSU tenure, I met with then-Mayor George McKelvey. A YSU alum, Mayor McKelvey frequently proclaimed, "So goes Youngstown State, so goes Youngstown; and so goes Youngstown, so goes Youngstown State." The Mayor clearly understood that the future of the city and the future of the University were intertwined.

At the time, the city was operating under a comprehensive plan formulated in the 1950s for a city of 150,000, not the post-industrial city of 80,000 that existed. Clearly, a new plan and vision were required. At the same time, the University was about to undertake a master plan addressing goals developed in YSU's newly developed Centennial Strategic Plan.

The Mayor and I agreed to initiate a collaborative planning process that would identify and support mutually beneficial initiatives. This collaborative approach was unprecedented in Youngstown and unique in the city-university literature. The city would develop a new comprehensive plan, which became known as Youngstown 2010, and the University would develop its Centennial Campus Master Plan as one *integrated* plan. Each of us designated a lead person for the planning partnership: Jay Williams, a young YSU alum who was recruited from his position in banking to become the Mayor's director of the Community Development Department; and Hunter Morrison, whom I had recruited from Cleveland to head the YSU Office of Campus Planning and Community Partnerships.

---

## The Vision and the Plan

The planning process began with a series of community-engagement workshops involving more than 200 leaders from across the city and region. Next, the planning team organized 11 neighborhood workshops in church basements, school classrooms, and other venues to encourage grassroots involvement. Finally, Mayor McKelvey and I cochaired a forum in December 2002, where an impressive crowd of 1,400 people gathered to hear the civic vision that resulted from their engagement in Youngstown 2010.

Youngstown 2010 is organized around the following four platforms:

- **Accepting that Youngstown is a smaller city**—Cities and their leaders too often believe that city size defines its success. In the 2010 Plan, Youngstown decided to break that mold and accept the fact that the city was not going to grow significantly. The University's component of the plan, however, called for enrollment growth to 14,000 students.
  - **Defining Youngstown's role in the new economy**—For more than a century, Youngstown had defined itself as a steel town. In the 2010 Plan, Youngstown recognized its future would be driven by the knowledge economy and acknowledged the University as critical to growing that economy. Second, and just as essential, the city and University recognized the importance of connecting to assets in the "Tech Belt" mega-region that stretches from Pittsburgh to Cleveland, with Youngstown and YSU at its center.
  - **Improving Youngstown's image and enhancing quality of life**—Youngstown has long been viewed as a rust-belt poster child. 2010 called for Youngstown to become a "cleaner, greener city" and pointed to the need to improve the appearance of the city by removing blight, greening highway corridors, and fixing the community's "broken windows." The plan also called for the city and community to promote and support quality-of-life resources.
  - **A call to action**—Youngstown 2010 recognized the importance of seeing results. The plan included a list of projects in which the community must engage to transform Youngstown into a sustainable mid-size city, including projects identified in the University's Centennial Campus Master Plan.
-

## Campus-Community Partnerships

The University's master plan called for a series of projects, including new student housing, a recreation and wellness center, a new business college building, and enhancements to the corridors and gateways to campus, all of which have been completed or are underway. The University has formed non-profit development corporations to undertake the work, and the University's partnership with the city has been and will be essential to successful completion of these projects.

One of the first collaborative projects completed was the University Courtyard Apartments, a 408-bed student apartment complex built on University land. The University formed the non-profit University Housing Corporation, which worked with a private developer and the city to expedite completion. The project was the first major new residential construction that the city had seen in decades. The student complex serves as a cornerstone for future redevelopment of the historic Smoky Hollow neighborhood adjacent to campus and downtown. In its day, Smoky Hollow was described as "the world in one neighborhood." Over the years, as residents moved to the suburbs or passed away, the University acquired the land and subsequently took the lead in forming a non-profit development organization, Wick Neighbors, comprised of area stakeholders to spearhead the redevelopment project.

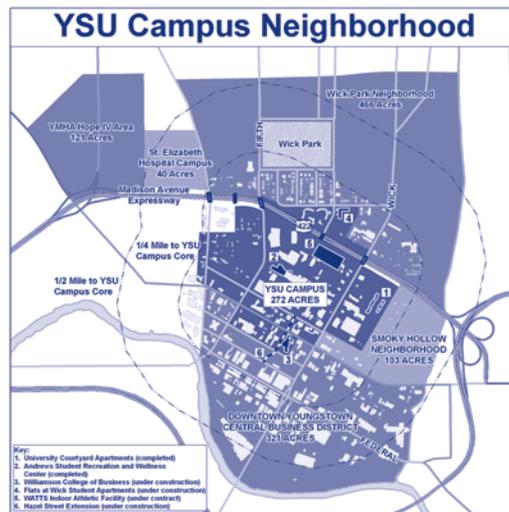
Bridge improvements on the Madison Avenue Expressway that leads to campus were completed in partnership with the Ohio Department of Transportation. The city-University partnership has led to the razing of dilapidated and abandoned buildings on land acquired by the University or bordering the campus, as well as the construction of attractive new gateways. The University helped organize another non-profit organization, CityScape, comprised of stakeholders interested in beautification and historic preservation in the downtown-University district.

The region's Congressman, U.S. Rep. Tim Ryan, has done his share by securing federal funds to improve pedestrian safety on the major thoroughfares surrounding the campus. Enhancing the city's downtown and the neighborhoods surrounding YSU's urban campus is making a big difference when marketing the University to prospective students and their parents.

Perhaps the best example of the mutual benefits of collaborative planning is currently taking place as a result of a partnership formed by the University, the city, and the Diocese of Youngstown. Construction crews are currently working on the new, \$34 million home for YSU's Williamson College of Business Administration. The three-story, 106,000-square-foot building, the largest single capital project in YSU history, takes up most of a city block at the northern edge of Youngstown's downtown business district, a site purposely chosen to create a strong physical link between YSU and the city.

---

The project is adjacent to St. Columba Cathedral and the Office of the Diocese of Youngstown, which has provided a land swap for the building site and will benefit from additional parking after construction is completed. The city's involvement has been essential to the success of this project. Youngstown is extending Hazel Street to more effectively connect the University and its new business college building to the central business district.



## The Impact of the Plan

Ever so slowly, Youngstown is shedding its former image as the poor poster child of America's decaying Rust Belt and taking on a proud new role as a community development leader and trend-setter for urban cities across America. Youngstown 2010 also is attracting the attention of development advocacy groups, writers, and business analysts from around the country and the world who see its potential as a blueprint to revive other beleaguered cities. The Brookings Institute, MIT, and Policy Links have all cited the work YSU and the city of Youngstown are doing as an urban development best practice.

The *New York Times Magazine* called Youngstown 2010's "creative shrinkage" concept one of the 74 best ideas in 2006. "For decades, depopulated Rust Belt cities have tried to grow their way back to prosperity," according to the article "Youngstown, Ohio has a new approach: shrinking its way to a new identity." The American Planning Association named Youngstown 2010 the winner of its National Planning Excellence Award for Public Outreach in 2007.

Confidence and optimism in the city's future have been further enhanced by the fact that the young YSU alum who became the city's community development director ran as an independent candidate to succeed the term-limited Mayor McKelvey and won, becoming the city's first African American mayor in the city's history.

Looking forward, the city-University partnership that has been started offers limitless opportunities for the Youngstown area and YSU. When work began on Youngstown 2010 and the Centennial Strategic Plan, the linear projections for the city's population and University's enrollment were grim. But those linear projections would have been accurate only if no changes were made. By forming partnerships, creating a shared vision, and collaborating to implement the plans, the changes envisioned in Youngstown 2010 will reposition the city and University for the twenty-first century economy.



### About the Author

**Dr. David C. Sweet** became Youngstown State University's president in July 2000 and mapped out a course that included three priorities: enrollment, diversity, and partnerships. The University has made great strides in all three areas. Since 2000, enrollment has grown by 25 percent to 14,700 and is now at the highest level in 17 years. The number of minority students has more than doubled and represents 20 percent of students. And the University has initiated partnerships with the city of Youngstown, the Youngstown city school districts, and business, government, and non-profit organizations throughout the region.

Previously, Dr. Sweet was dean and professor of the Levin College of Urban Affairs at Cleveland State, director of the Ohio Department of Development, commissioner of the Ohio Public Utilities Commission, and director of regional economic research at the Battelle Institute in Columbus, Ohio.

Dr. Sweet holds a Ph.D. from The Ohio State University, an M.A. from the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, and a B.A. from the University of Rochester.

After a decade of success and service, Dr. Sweet and his wife, Pat, will retire from the presidency on June 30, 2010.

---

**PRESIDENTIAL  
PERSPECTIVES**



[www.PresidentialPerspectives.org](http://www.PresidentialPerspectives.org)