

Higher Education's Anchor Mission: A Sharpened Imperative & A Framework for Action

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Introduction

Institutions of higher education play a key role in shaping the cultural, political, and built environments of the communities they live in, and the recognition of this influence has shaped higher education's community engagement practices over the last several decades.ⁱ While different frames for classifying community engagement activities have emerged over the years, from service-learning to university-school partnerships to place-based community engagement, a shared value that drives this work is the commitment to leverage the research, teaching, and service capacities of institutions to advance the public good. Often referred to as the "civic mission" or "public mission," advancing knowledge that both improves the human condition and prepares individuals to contribute to a democratic society is considered a core function of contemporary higher education.ⁱⁱ

Another frame for community engagement that has increasingly taken shape in higher education is that of the anchor mission. Defined as the "commitment to intentionally apply an institution's long-term, place-based economic power and human capital in partnership with community to mutually benefit the long-term well-being of both,"ⁱⁱⁱ colleges and universities across the United States have developed various initiatives designed to address community challenges through the anchor mission.

While the anchor mission has been adopted by institutions throughout the field to acknowledge their relationship, as place-based institutions, with their neighboring communities, the implementation of anchor initiatives has not been fully integrated and resourced in higher education institutions. It is also imperative that initiatives utilize people-centered strategies and address the systemic issues faced by their communities' long-term residents.

Given the health and economic threats posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the shrinking public trust in the academic enterprise,^{iv} and the recent demands for accountability and measurable action with respect to racial justice,^v higher education is at a critical inflection point. Not only must it continue to strive to advance innovations in learning and research, but it must also consider its role in aiding the pandemic recovery and building the infrastructure for a more equitable and resilient future. In order to meet their full potential as anchor institutions, colleges and universities must not overlook the power of leveraging their core assets—hiring, purchasing, and investment—toward this end.

Facilitating a more rapid and effective adoption of the anchor mission across the sector requires more than the recognition of one's rootedness and impact on the community. It necessitates a shared vision in the field of higher education for creating more equitable economies by prioritizing the needs of local, long-term, and low-income residents. The purpose of this paper is to rearticulate the goals of the anchor mission and position it as a framework through which higher education institutions can more fully realize their commitment to the public good and make more equitable the

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local economies they support and often underpin. Following this positioning, this paper will explore the current landscape and future direction of higher education engaging in the anchor mission.

Higher Education and the Anchor Mission

Efforts that seek to contribute to the social and economic success of cities in which they are located are not a new feature of higher education. In fact, the field's legacy of public service traces back to its founding and undergirds the array of community outreach activities that are seemingly ubiquitous across colleges and universities today.^{vi} However, it was not until the latter half of the 20th century that universities were more heavily relied upon to support regional economic development as anchors in their communities.^{vii}

Decades of deindustrialization and globalization caused the manufacturing-based economies in America's major cities to transform into knowledge-based economies.^{viii} Jobs that once provided stability for the working class were decimated by global manufacturing and automation. While such economic changes have taken place in heterogeneous ways across the U.S. (with some cities experiencing population growth, and others consistent decline), concomitant racial inequities, neoliberal governance structures, and the failure to replace working class jobs with family-sustaining wages have bred similar outcomes: the concentration of poverty in BIPOC communities and a widened wealth gap for all.^{ix}

By the 1990s, universities and hospitals were among the largest employers in their cities and thus took on a greater significance in their local labor markets.^x Due to their financial and human resources, universities were positioned to have a greater impact on the social and economic statuses of their cities.^{xi} Nevertheless, their spatial immobility meant that the declining economic landscape of cities affected their operations and their ability to attract talent.^{xii} Thus, a combination of pressure from local government and "enlightened self-interest" drove universities to play a more active role in improving their communities.

Today, higher education's role in addressing community-level problems is expressed through a variety of activities described widely amongst higher education institutions as anchor initiatives. Real estate and commercial development, health and social service delivery, school partnerships, employer-assisted housing programs, and even local purchasing and hiring are common types of anchor initiatives implemented by universities.^{xiii} Even though these efforts share an emphasis on locality, what constitutes as "local" may vary from institution to institution. Some may direct their efforts over an entire region while others target specific neighborhoods.^{xiv} Furthermore, activities like those aforementioned tend to resemble already existing community engagement and economic development practices and policies, rather than the anchor mission framework: the intentional, targeted, and institutionally embedded strategy that leverages anchors' economic power and human capital in partnership with community to promote a more localized and inclusive economy.^{xv}

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As institutions increasingly embrace their roles as critical economic engines in their communities, the range of anchor initiatives will similarly evolve. If, however, such initiatives do not include intentional shifts in the business and operational practices of their campuses, the field may miss an opportunity to more effectively transform the conditions that negatively impact low-income and long-term residents in their communities. The anchor mission combines a systems framework and actionable strategies to confront and redress these deep-rooted inequities and build the local economic ecosystem.

(Re)Articulating the Goals of the Anchor Mission

To understand the significance of utilizing economic assets like purchasing, hiring, and investment towards the benefit of the community, it is necessary to clarify what makes the anchor mission stand apart from other community and economic development approaches. As discussed earlier, the anchor mission is the “commitment to intentionally apply an institution’s long-term, place-based economic power and human capital in partnership with community to mutually benefit the long-term well-being of both.” What differentiates the anchor mission from other place-based approaches to community and economic development is that it is grounded in Community Wealth Building (CWB).

CWB is a “system-changing approach to community economic development that works to produce broadly shared economic prosperity, racial equity, and ecological sustainability. CWB achieves this through the reconfiguration of economic institutions and local economies on the basis of greater democratic ownership, participation, and control.”^{xvi}

CWB is a place-based and people-centered approach to economic development that emphasizes intentional and collaborative strategies to maximize the economic multiplier effect created by capturing and circulating a greater portion of existing local wealth. Central to this approach is leveraging rooted and enduring economic engines like anchor institutions to help support and develop the ecosystem of locally controlled and broadly owned institutions and businesses—thereby enabling the local community and long-term residents to have greater agency and ownership in creating a system that is more equitable.^{xvii}

Through the lens of CWB, the anchor mission framework enables anchor institutions to be active participants in addressing the root causes of racial and economic inequities that create barriers to thriving communities by creating wealth building opportunities for those disproportionately impacted by discrimination and disinvestment, which are most likely to be BIPOC and low-income residents.^{xviii}

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Urban renewal and economic development practices led by anchor institutions typically reflect market-driven principles that prioritize profit making rather than building and circulating wealth locally.

In traditional economic development, the emphasis is often on the number of jobs created rather than the number of living wage roles or is biased toward high-skilled roles that further leave behind hard-to-employ individuals. Strategies often focus on attraction using expensive tax incentives that burden local governments and residents and overlook the economic multiplier effect and community benefits from locally rooted, broad-based ownership. Workforce approaches often emphasize training programs without attention to linkages to actual jobs. Overall, little attention is focused on how economic development investments can intentionally help mitigate economic and racial inequities.^{xxi}

The anchor mission provides us with an opportunity to depart from traditional forms of economic development and urban revitalization measures that have historically exacerbated inequalities in communities and resulted in displacement.^{xix,xx} As large economic engines with socially embedded missions, anchor institutions like colleges and universities have some of the most powerful, yet underutilized, economic resources. Through the intentional deployment of core economic assets like purchasing, hiring, and investment, colleges and universities can more fully realize their public missions by addressing the root causes of racial and economic inequities that affect their communities.

The Anchor Mission Approach: Hiring, Investment, and Purchasing Practices

Increasingly, the anchor mission framework is being utilized in the healthcare sector as an inclusive economic development strategy to address the upstream community conditions that create downstream health disparities and overall poor health outcomes. The Healthcare Anchor Network (HAN), which includes participation of more than 70 health systems comprising more than 1,000 hospitals, is catalyzing health systems to innovate in anchor mission implementation and offers the most comprehensive examples of the anchor mission approach. The collective progress of HAN's members in defining leadership standards and promoting industry collaboration make it a powerful example for higher education institutions to draw from—although the imperative for action may differ, the overarching framework and underlying strategies are the same.

In the sections below, we outline the principles that constitute each of the core three anchor mission strategies of inclusive local, hiring; place-based investing; and impact purchasing; and offer examples from HAN members.

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Inclusive, Local Hiring and Internal Workforce Development

Many communities face unstable local economies and limited career opportunities that do not require some form of post-secondary education or training. As a result, residents from low-income communities, who are often BIPOC, face barriers to accessing jobs with family-supporting wages.

Inclusive, local hiring is an anchor strategy that incorporates strategies that focus on access, opportunity, and targeted outreach, to ensure that no one is left out of the economic potential of good local jobs to improve the income and wealth prospects of local residents. Central to this strategy is identifying, connecting, and training local residents from economically disadvantaged neighborhoods to fill jobs that provide a family-supporting wage and that are connected to career pathways with opportunities to advance in the organization.

University Hospitals (UH) is a Cleveland, OH-based academic medical center that employs over 25,000 non-physician employees. In 2013, UH established the Step Up to UH program, an inclusive, local hiring initiative that focuses on connecting residents from specific high-poverty neighborhoods to high-demand, entry-level jobs and career ladder opportunities in their system. UH's talent acquisition team partners with community organizations to identify and recruit local hires.

Once connected with potential applicants, UH's team utilizes an internally developed readiness program to help prepare applicants for success in the hiring process. To manage the high volume of applicants in their pool, UH sets aside a certain number of open positions and interviews for graduates of the program. Since its launch, Step Up to UH has had 381 hires with an 88 percent first-year retention rate. UH developed this model further in 2020 in partnership with their regional Healthcare Sector Partnership (which also includes HAN members Cleveland Clinic and The MetroHealth System), and now pursues this work through the partnership as part of its Career On Ramp initiative.

For incumbent employees, UH offers worker-training programs, called pathways programs, that prepare them for internal advancement into roles like Pharmacy Technicians, Community Health Workers, and Medical Assistants. Incumbent employees also have access to career coaching support to receive guidance on training options. Since 2016, more than 1,200 employees have taken advantage of the coaching program. As of 2021, 199 employees received individual coaching support, 38 individuals were promoted as a result of pathway programming, and a total of 61 employees transferred to higher wage positions or lateral positions with a comparable wage level but greater career ladder opportunities.

Place-based Investing

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Place-based investing refers to geographically targeted impact investments that address community conditions that create racial, economic, and environmental disparities. In FY 2020 alone, universities had endowments of more than \$691 billion, which are invested in stocks and bonds outside of their communities.^{xxii} There exists an opportunity to redirect a portion of these assets to fill market gaps in financing for sustainable projects like affordable housing, grocery stores, capital for small and diverse businesses, and other high-impact community projects.

HAN currently recognizes leaders in this strategy as those institutions that have allocated at least one percent of their long-term reserves (healthcare's equivalent to an endowment) to place-based investments. This strategy harnesses and leverages wealth more intentionally to continue to benefit and grow more equitably the local economy in which the institution resides, instead of it being disconnected or extracted from the community that created it.

Headquartered in Cincinnati, OH with hospitals across seven states, Bon Secours Mercy Health, has allocated 1 percent of its long-term investment portfolio for place-based investments. Over the past ten years, it has deployed \$34 million with community development financial institutions (CDFIs). A notable example of its commitment to supporting community wealth building through place-based investing is the support of the Maggie Walker Community Land Trust (MWCLT) in Richmond, VA. The MWCLT develops and stewards permanently affordable housing opportunities to create inclusive, affordable, and healthy places to live and foster more racially equitable communities.

In 2016, Bon Secours helped to launch the MWCLT by providing a \$260,000 grant followed by a \$250,000 four-year loan with a 2.5 percent interest rate. In this manner, this example also highlights the potential impact from aligning limited grants with sustainable investments to help catalyze high-impact community projects that serve low-income and BIPOC communities. MWCLT currently supports 50 permanently affordable homes across the Richmond area, 45 percent of which are BIPOC owned.

As the largest private employer in the state, Dartmouth Health invested \$3 million into the New Hampshire Community Loan Fund, a CDFI that provides capital to underserved people in New Hampshire to support their greater economic participation. Among other areas, Dartmouth Health's investment supports homeowner financing and technical assistance to residents of manufactured-home parks to purchase and run their parks as resident-owned communities—a critical strategy for retaining local control and allowing residents to build wealth through homeownership.

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Impact Purchasing¹

Impact purchasing is a strategic approach to procurement in which an institution considers social impact criteria alongside other factors like cost and quality in decision making. The goal is to intentionally address economic, racial, and environmental disparities that affect the communities it serves. To do so, institutions commit to increasing their spend with local, diverse, sustainable, and employee-owned vendors, as well as supporting businesses in building their capacity to fill supply chain gaps.

They also seek out other ways to maximize their purchasing power for greater impact. For example, they work with their largest direct suppliers to develop impact hiring strategies and ensure that they too are paying a living wage and creating quality jobs.² Anchors may also collaborate locally to leverage their combined purchasing power towards supporting the same diverse, sustainable, and employee-owned vendors as a means of supporting a sustainable business model for those vendors. By adopting these types of intentional strategies, anchor institutions can help to drive place-based economic growth, create family-supporting jobs, and build community wealth.

As previously described, one way anchor institutions can maximize their purchasing impact is through their support of inclusive business structures and aggregating demand through multi-anchor initiatives. Take, for example, the Evergreen Cooperatives. Based in Cleveland, Ohio and launched in 2008, Evergreen Cooperatives is a set of worker-owned businesses designed to meet anchor supply chain needs. Support for Evergreen grew out of a joint project between the Cleveland Foundation, University Hospitals (UH), Cleveland Clinic, and Case Western Reserve University, and it currently includes a commercial laundry facility (Evergreen Cooperative Laundry) and an urban greenhouse (Green City Growers).³

What makes Evergreen Cooperatives unique is its worker-owned model, its explicit goal to hire individuals facing barriers to employment (such as justice-impacted individuals), and how it connects employees to other wealth building opportunities. The worker-owned structure of the company allows employees to become part owners of the company, providing them opportunities to participate in decision making and build wealth through profit sharing. Likewise, it ensures that the enterprises will remain in the community. Through its homebuyer program, participating employees receive financial education, property tax abatements, and payroll deductions that help them pay off their homes.

¹ The Healthcare Anchor Network has shifted to using 'impact purchasing' from 'inclusive, local purchasing' to encompass the expanding array of high-impact strategies that anchor institutions can adopt to benefit their communities through leveraging their supply chain activities.

² To learn more about impact hiring strategies, view this example from Intermountain Healthcare: <https://www.utahbusiness.com/intermountain-healthcare-collaborate-to-create-jobs-in-utah/>.

³ To learn more about Evergreen Cooperatives, view their website: <http://www.evgoh.com/about-us/>.

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Evergreen Cooperatives also supports a fund aimed at helping acquire and convert other local businesses to employee ownership and helping those businesses create similar employee wealth building structures.

Businesses like Evergreen Cooperatives are sustained through the intentional support and purchasing power of anchor institutions, which provide the capital they need to make a positive impact. As an early supporter, University Hospitals contributed \$1.25 million as seed funding to assist with the development of Evergreen Cooperatives. In 2018, Cleveland Clinic, an academic medical center based in Cleveland, Ohio employing 55,000 employees in Cleveland, shifted its contract for the operations of its laundry facility to Evergreen Cooperative Laundry (ECL), enabling ECL to triple its staff. Because of their support, ECL has been able to employ 250 worker owners, 83 percent of which are BIPOC and 55 percent of which are justice-impacted individuals.

The collective efforts of anchor institutions to address shared purchasing needs and job creation in Cleveland have led to other innovations and local policy changes that promote and sustain CWB. Case Western Reserve, Cleveland Clinic, and University Hospitals created a commercial mail processing facility called the Mail Service Hub as an alternative to each system individually contracting with vendors for this service.^{xxiii} Located on Case Western Reserve University's campus, the Mail Service Hub increases efficiencies in mail service for these local anchor institutions while creating employment opportunities for local residents. University Hospitals has also made commitments around diversity, procurement, and local hiring of residents for the construction of its medical facilities, which inspired Mayor of Cleveland Frank G. Jackson to create a city-wide Community Benefits Agreements (CBA) in which many major employers participate, including Cleveland Clinic and The MetroHealth System.^{xxiv}

Hiring, purchasing, and investing remain the core anchor mission strategy pillars. However, as health systems have adopted this asset-based framework, they are exploring other organizational resources that they can also intentionally leverage to truly maximize their impact on community conditions. These additional organizational resources include their voice for policy advocacy, their facilities and real estate for equitable development, their development and grantmaking to complement anchor strategies that build community wealth, and their employee volunteer programs to more intentionally support community needs and goals.

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Moving Forward with a Transformative Vision

As demonstrated by the examples above, the anchor mission framework provides a structure that guides the intentional deployment of an institution's economic assets and can be applied across different institutional types and geographies. The anchor mission foregrounds the needs of long-term and low-income residents and catalyzes solutions that more intentionally build, retain, and circulate wealth locally. Through the anchor mission framework, colleges and universities can better serve their public mission by more cohesively aligning their business interests and operational practices with their community engagement efforts.

This idea is reflected in the Carnegie Foundation's Elective Community Engagement Classification which includes the anchor mission framework as part of community engagement commitments and activities.^{xxv} Universities in the United States employ nearly 4 million people^{xxvi}, spend over \$200 billion on goods and services and hold nearly 700 billion in endowments. Responding to community needs by leveraging these resources for anchor mission strategies can more effectively address persistent racial and economic inequities by building the capacity for more inclusive and sustainable supply chains, creating family supporting jobs, and investing in community goals such as supporting and preserving affordable housing for local residents.^{xxix}

While a widespread adoption of the anchor mission in the field of higher education remains to be seen, there are promising examples of campuses who have incorporated the anchor mission framework into their public mission. For instance, Drexel University identifies the anchor mission as a key component of their civic engagement mission:

As an anchor institution we have made a commitment to the Philadelphia community we are part of. We are a private institution working for the public good, and much of our work is in creative collaboration with our campus neighbors. We carry out this mission through our academic and research functions, through our business operations, and through the volunteer power of our students and employees.^{xxx}

Notable strategies include its Buy Local, Hire Local, and Build Local programs, each coordinated by the Office of University and Community Partnerships through the Economic Inclusion Initiative. This initiative centralizes support for Drexel's business functions, facilitating the connection between West Philadelphia community partners and Drexel's procurement, human resources, and construction units. In doing so, the university directs financial resources into West Philadelphia.

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Similarly, University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL) weaves the anchor mission framework and strategies with its community engagement goals to benefit the North County and St. Louis regions. Their approach includes goals for local hiring and local purchasing, in addition to working with local schools and other place-based projects. To maximize its impact in the area, UMSL has partnered with Edward Jones, a financial services firm headquartered in St. Louis, to support the St. Louis Anchor Action Network: a collective of local anchor institutions seeking to build community wealth by “leveraging intentional hiring, career development, and spending” in high-poverty neighborhoods across the City of St. Louis and St. Louis County.^{xxxii}

Examples of place-based investment, though an underutilized strategy in higher education, have emerged within campuses implementing anchor mission strategies as a part of their commitment to the public good. Through their Anchor Institution Initiative, University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) created a place-based investment pilot program to address racial and economic inequities in the San Francisco and East Bay regions.^{xxxiii} With an investment totaling \$5 million, the pilot provides three-year loans to four community-focused financial intermediaries with a track record of providing economic support in the areas of housing, employment, and small business development. UCSF’s investment will be repaid to the institution at a 1 percent annual interest rate.

Anchor initiatives such as those above demonstrate both that the anchor mission approach can be adopted comprehensively within higher education and the importance of integrating this frame as part of an institution’s goals and long-term strategy. It also hints at the possibilities that can come from higher education and healthcare utilizing the same framework for action and how together they can catalyze meaningful community impact through collaboration. For example, anchor collaboratives—eds, meds, local government, public schools, place-focused foundations, and occasionally non-anchor corporate partners committing together to use anchor strategies to address economic and racial inequities within a defined geography—are emerging in cities and communities across the country from St. Louis, Missouri to Ogden, Utah to Springfield, Massachusetts.⁴

The anchor mission framework provides a practical toolkit and aspirational north star for institutions to more systematically and authentically demonstrate their commitment to address social inequities and steward the long-term well-being of the place in which they reside. In order to realize this potential, leaders must be willing to critically interrogate how their current business and operational practices conflict with the goals of their public mission and not leave any resource underleveraged. If institutions are fully committed to addressing persistent inequities afflicting their communities, they must fully embrace the anchor mission framework as they deepen their existing efforts.

⁴ The Healthcare Anchor Network provides [advisory services](#) to several of these networks that its members are involved in.

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List of Resources

These Healthcare Anchor Network toolkits and resources are focused on health systems but many of the practices can also be utilized by higher education institutions.

- [Hospitals Aligned for Healthier Communities: Inclusive Local Hiring](#)
This toolkit offers a guide for how health systems can leverage hiring practices to advance inclusive, local job creation and career development for communities experiencing the greatest health and wealth disparities.
- [Hospitals Aligned for Healthier Communities: Impact Purchasing](#)
This toolkit offers a guide for how health systems can leverage their supply chains to support diverse and locally owned vendors and help to incubate new community enterprises to fill supply chain gaps.
- [Hospitals Aligned for Healthier Communities: Place-Based Investing](#)
This toolkit outlines place-based investing strategies that allow health systems to earn a financial return on their investments while producing a positive social, economic, or environmental impact within their geographical service areas.
- Healthcare Anchor Network's [Resources for the Anchor Mission](#)
- [Anchor Mission Playbook](#)
This playbook offers recommendations drawn from research carried out to help Rush University Medical Center align around its Anchor Mission. These findings are intended to help other hospitals and health systems accelerate their own efforts to drive institutional alignment with community needs.
- [Urban and Metropolitan Universities: The Transformative Power of Anchor Institutions](#)
This issue of Metropolitan Universities journal focuses on the role of urban colleges and universities in addressing long standing inequities in their communities.

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Healthcare Anchor Network (HAN). HAN is a nationally recognized collaboration of health systems more intentionally leveraging their purchasing, hiring, and investing power to improve health and well-being by addressing economic and racial inequities in the communities they serve.

HAN works to achieve a critical mass of health systems adopting the anchor mission, a proactive commitment to leverage their economic, political, and human capital in partnership with community to drive equitable, local economic impact.

Coalition of Urban & Metropolitan Universities (CUMU). Since 1989, CUMU has become a leading voice and forum for higher education leaders anchoring and energizing urban and metropolitan communities. CUMU helps our members contend with the complexities of their work by providing opportunities for them to exchange ideas for how to break down barriers and institutionalize practices that enable intentional, transformative change involving students, faculty, staff, and community partners.

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For more information, contact the Healthcare Anchor Network at info@anchornetwork.org.

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