

# Looking towards 2072: Portland, Portland State, and a Shared Future

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Ethan Seltzer and Sy Adler

## Introduction

In the fall of 2021 Sy Adler, interim Dean of the College of Urban and Public Affairs, noted that 2022 would mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the City of Portland's 1972 Downtown Plan and that PSU and CUPA should do something to mark the occasion. Ethan Seltzer, Emeritus Professor in the School of Urban Studies and Planning, proposed that a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration should focus on the identification of PSU as Portland's "urban university" in the 1972 plan.

To many, the "urban mission" for PSU emerged most forcefully in the 1991 PSU strategic planning effort, led by then-PSU President Judith Ramaley. Yet, here it was, outlined in one of the core goals for the 1972 plan, and articulated as:

Portland State should be an "urban university." By this phrase we intend to imply far more than a fact of location. We believe that PSU and the city should be consciously aware of, take advantage of, and in fact emphasize their impact on each other. (City of Portland, 1972, p. 10).

The implication that PSU and the City would both exist and prosper in a relationship marked by the interdependence of the two institutions was exciting. But where did it come from? How did that idea, often associated with work at PSU some 20 years later, show up with such clarity in 1972? How could a better understanding of PSU's urban university heritage help craft a course for the future of PSU, and that of the City itself? What were the critical questions today in 2022, not so much about what was done in 1972, but what we might aspire to in this place by 2072?

To investigate these questions, Seltzer joined with School of Urban Studies and Planning PhD candidate Kimberly Nightingale to develop a paper about the history of the urban university idea in the US, and then here at PSU and in Portland. That paper, "Portland, Portland State, and the Urban University Idea" (February 16, 2022, College of Urban and Public Affairs, Portland State University, [https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/rememberpsu\\_essays/6/](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/rememberpsu_essays/6/)), explored the history of urban universities in the US, the way in which that legacy became "baked in" to PSU from its very beginning at the Portland Extension Center in 1946, and how the distinctive attributes of an urban university provided PSU with a series of questions and opportunities as it considered its next 50 years.

Dean Adler then created a series of 8 panel discussions, held in the Dirce Moroni Toulan Library for both a live and streamed audience, to review the paper in light of current conditions in downtown Portland and leadership changes coming for both the College of Urban and Public Affairs and for PSU itself (<https://www.pdx.edu/urban-public-affairs/psu-as-urban-university>). Portland and PSU will both be facing signature challenges in the years ahead. This paper is a summary of the key ideas emerging in those panel discussions and is presented as a tool for both PSU and the City to use as they jointly face current challenges and contemplate future aspirations.

### The Panels and Core Themes

Eight panels were convened based loosely on key elements of the 1972 Downtown Plan combined with key elements from the paper by Nightingale and Seltzer. All panels included both PSU staff or faculty, and Portland citizens or representatives of organizations or the City of Portland and Multnomah County governments themselves. After starting with a panel focused explicitly on the paper, the remaining seven panels considered community engaged research, institutional collaboration, transportation, government reform, PSU and urban design, housing and neighborhoods, and the future for downtown as a commercial center.

Panelists were asked to read and reflect on the paper. Of particular interest were the five key elements that define an urban university. To be Portland's urban university:

- Place matters. Though PSU is a university and associated with the core mission for an educational and research institution, place, particularly the needs and aspirations of that place, plays a major role in the commitments and operation of the university itself. By being "in and of its place", PSU should play a role in the lives and thinking of residents, institutions, alums, and others, and the place, before just the City and now the entire metropolitan region, should play a role in the work of faculty, students, and administrators at PSU.
- The access mission is alive and well. PSU should be committed to providing urban residents with access to higher education close to where they live, work, and have family and other support networks, and preparing their students to be successful participants in the local economy and valued members of the community.
- PSU is engaged in an ongoing balancing act. PSU's actions should reflect an awareness of the conflicting aims of a traditional research university and the urban university, and committed to realigning rewards and incentives, business and planning practices, career paths, hiring criteria, and other factors needed to ensure that the urban university is distinctive among institutions of higher education for its urban mission and place focus and, in fact, as an "urban research university."
- Interdisciplinarity is both a core value and critical outcome. Teaching, research, and service should exemplify the interdisciplinary reality of urban life and act to ensure that traditional disciplinary views of the city do not stand in the way of cultivating

interdisciplinary approaches necessary for addressing the needs of the contemporary urban community.

- The University is an agent for change for students, higher education, and the region. PSU should both be engaged in helping to address current needs, but consistently focused on assisting with achieving the highest aspirations of its community for the future. Wherever possible, PSU should meet its mission through partnerships spanning university/community boundaries, and across public, private, and nonprofit sectors that advance widely held community aspirations.

Each panel approached envisioning the next 50 years for PSU and its role in the city and the region in its own way. Following presentations by panelists and discussion among the panelists, questions were fielded from both those present as well as the online audience.

Looking across all eight panels, and using the key elements that define an urban university, summarized above, we believe that Portland State University is faced by a number of challenges as it considers the next 50 years of its urban university relationship with this region:

**PLACE:**

Downtown is currently in crisis. Just as in 1972, downtown today is experiencing disinvestment, an uncertain economic future, challenges from suburban employment centers, and a lack of vision and direction. In 1972 the City had to envision a dramatically different future, and it took decades to realize all that the 1972 Downtown Plan had to offer. Similarly, today we can expect that what downtown will become will not materialize overnight, and that a long term and sustained effort will be required to make downtown back into that primary center envisioned in the last 50 years of city and regional planning.

Some have proposed that housing can turn things around. Though additional housing in downtown, really the Central City, is viewed by most as a good and necessary step, it will not be a quick transformation. Simply stated, neither financing tools nor the resources are there to make a big change quickly. Importantly, housing is a city and statewide issue. Simply adding housing to downtown will in no way enable Portland to tackle the housing availability and affordability crisis that it faces today for all income levels.

Consequently, PSU now must see itself as that neighbor, landowner, developer, and enterprise that makes it a critical player in downtown Portland and for downtown Portland's future. PSU owns about 19% of downtown making it the second largest landowner in downtown after the city itself. With 48% of the land area in downtown in right-of-way, the city, not counting its buildings, parks, and other facilities, is by far the largest single landowner. Both institutions need to re-envision both their current use of land resources, and their future needs to come up with new connections to the private landownership and investment critical to downtown's future.

However, this call for re-envisioning the use of land really speaks to a larger and more primary challenge, namely what will this next generation vision for downtown be? What do we want downtown to mean, both for the city and the region? What should downtown do for neighborhoods? What is the meaning of and purpose for a downtown today? Perhaps most directly, what do we want a “city” to be and to mean, and how should its downtown help to further those aspirations? With climate posing an existential crisis to us all, and climate change likely to bring new and unexplored challenges to our resiliency and sense of place, how should downtown reflect these new realities? What will a more socially just, equitable, and diverse downtown look like, not just in terms of the physical place, but economically, socially, and politically?

At this writing, much remains in flux. The pandemic is still with us, and businesses, who began reassessing their need for office space ten years ago, are still trying to decide what the future of their workplaces will be. Nonetheless, the need for a new and compelling vision and concrete list of aspirations is clear. Portland State shouldn’t be waiting for this conversation to begin. As a major institutional player in downtown it should be joining with other key interests and institutions to begin the hard work of re-envisioning the central city, not as a passive participant but as a leader.

However, though some circumstances today echo those of 1972, others speak to new and broader themes not really addressed by that 1972 plan. Perhaps most important for PSU is the fact that its community is no longer just the city and its downtown, but the entire metropolitan region. Economies today are metropolitan in scope. Labor and housing markets aren’t constrained within individual jurisdictions. Transportation systems have expanded to provide a wide range of modal choices throughout metropolitan areas. This metropolitan area in particular, with Metro, the only directly elected regional government in the US, has a robust regional plan that calls for the emergence of a many-centered metropolitan region which Portland, by state land use law, is charged with helping to realize.

All of this points to the fact that Portland’s “urban university” of today and looking forward is metropolitan in scope. Rather than a single institutional partner, PSU today needs to understand itself as being the urban university for 24 cities and five counties in Oregon, and parts of two states. Being known within this region, vital to its prospects, and engaged in realizing a wide range of often conflicting goals is no easy challenge. There is no one simple path for PSU. But, PSU must at least begin to fundamentally rescale its understanding of its place. Our common future is no longer simply a “city” future.

#### **ACCESS MISSION:**

The history of urban universities in the US is closely aligned with the urbanization of the US population and the need to provide more and more robust educational opportunities close to where people lived. This, in fact, is the founding story for PSU itself, starting with the Portland Extension Center in 1946. Today, that need to serve the access mission is no different than at any other time in our history.

Much has changed, not just in the last 50 years, but since 1946. Our economy looks fundamentally different. In 1972 there was still a large timber industry in this state, and Portland was the economic, service, and supply center serving that industry and others in the inland Pacific Northwest.

Today the timber industry is a shadow of what it was. Though we are on the cusp of a new timber era in Oregon and the northwest, with opportunities for new forest products and contributions of forests to climate resilience leading the way, the roles for Portland in all of that remains to be seen. Research into the urban/rural interconnections in Oregon, for example, show an evolution towards less interdependence, not more (Toward One Oregon; <https://osupress.oregonstate.edu/book/toward-one-oregon>).

We remain in an ongoing economic transition, without which our future would be dim. But, bridging the present to that new economy is precisely the role that PSU can and should play. Note that this raises fundamental questions for PSU. What is the purpose of a higher education? When does higher education begin and does or should it ever really end? How should PSU, its students and stakeholders view the connection between getting a higher education and getting a job?

In a broader sense, how can PSU prepare its graduates for life, work, and community in a rapidly changing world? What kind of community and society do we want PSU to foster? What, in fact, must the “access” portion of the access mission really refer to? Are we clear enough in our aims as an institution of higher education, a uniquely urban centered one, to be able to both explain ourselves in the terms we want to use and able to enlist the partners we need to make it so?

There is also a profound demographic shift occurring here and nationally, namely a decline in the population of prospective students. In 1972 the focus for PSU was on expanding to meet and expanding population. Today the challenge in many ways is twofold: first, to contemplate what it will mean for PSU to sustain itself without the prospect of great enrollment growth, and second, to engage much more actively with community colleges and secondary institutions on one hand, and directly with community members on the other to create seamless pathways to and through our programs.

For example, for many years the Music Department hosted all of the local community college music departments on campus to align programs, degrees, and initiatives. That was a partnership created not by PSU but by Music. What would it look like for PSU to have institutional relationships like that? This is not simply a question of articulation, though that is important. It is more a question of blurring institutional boundaries to make things easy for students and communities rather than institutions.

Finally, for an urban university like PSU the term “access” has more to do with than simply providing local access to degrees. It also importantly applies to access to the products of

research and to linking community needs for new knowledge to the core function of any university for creating new knowledge. Top-down models have not proven to be either long-lasting or successful. What should the future for these knowledge creation partnerships look like? Who or what at PSU should be held accountable for ensuring that they exist? How will we understand success in this realm?

PSU has experimented with these ideas in the past with “sustainability” and a range of “centers of excellence” initiatives leading the way. However, what have we learned from these experiences? Are we doing it well? Who are our partners and do they care about the outcomes? More to the point, is there a better way to enable the needs for new knowledge in our community to become recognized and acted on institutionally by PSU? And if so, how would we do that with an eye towards remaining nimble and resilient in the context of an ever-changing community and world?

### **URBAN UNIVERISTY VS/AND TRADITIONAL UNIVERISTY:**

Urban universities in the US didn't just spring fully formed from some sort of educational primordial ooze. In fact, they were joined at the hip with traditional conceptions for universities. Ever since, they have struggled with the balance between the two: would urban universities embrace their urban mission even when it conflicted with traditional university norms, or would urban universities attach themselves to the urban mission when convenient, but by-and-large exist to reflect typical norms and values associated with higher educational institutions and the disciplines that make them up?

In 1991, PSU made important strides towards emphasizing its urban mission with the adoption of its 1991 Strategic Plan. For example, realigning promotion and tenure guidelines to reflect the scholarship of teaching and service alongside that of traditional research was no small accomplishment. Creating the university studies curriculum, still very much a work in progress today over 25 years later, was an important step towards recognizing the roles for students as citizens and leaders in the Portland and Oregon community.

Still, the ongoing conflict remains. Realizing the urban mission is largely left up to individual faculty, with little evidence of a real institutional commitment to that mission in deed or function. Internal university systems for enabling faculty and units to create partnerships remain mired in a traditional university model, with each partnership having to begin from scratch. Economies of scale don't exist in or for these purposes. It's discouraging, frustrating, and exhausting for all concerned.

Just as with downtown, a new vision is needed. What would PSU look like if serving the urban mission was both understood as an institutional priority, perhaps the institutional priority, and easy? How can traditional norms of inquiry and practice associated with traditional university ideals be recast to both support faculty careers and the urban mission at PSU? What should it mean to hire faculty in all units with an eye towards community competency? How should PSU

enable all faculty to better develop community capacity through the course of their careers? What would mentoring, training, and support look like with these ideas in mind?

### **INTERDISCIPLINARITY:**

Only a university describes community issues in terms of disciplines or disciplinary perspectives and practices. The old saying, “If your only tool is a hammer, all your problems look like nails,” applies here. Grave misjudgments have arisen from this kind of perspective taken too far. The challenges for the urban university are to understand its place as fully as it can, to regularly transmit that understanding both within the university and back to the community, and then to ensure that the organization of the university does not prevent the interdisciplinary approaches needed to best incorporate that understanding in what PSU adds to the partnerships it’s a part of.

Today we trip over boundaries between disciplines, practices, and units that we find ourselves with within PSU. What would it mean and how would it look if interdisciplinarity was a norm rather than an exception? If those engaging in it didn’t have to make a heroic effort to bring it about? How could interdisciplinarity at PSU be recognized as one of the real benefits of working at and being part of PSU for a career? As a graduate and alum? As a community stakeholder and partner? We often refer to interdisciplinarity as something we value but have yet to make it easy and commonplace.

### **AGENT FOR CHANGE:**

Being an agent for change means acting, with others, to make this place better than we found it. As an agent for change, PSU strives to be a trusted partner in ensuring that social justice, livability, and access to opportunity are tangible aspects of life in this region for all. In short, as former Portland Chief Planner Ernie Bonner used to note, planning for equity means creating more choices for those that have the fewest, and in the process creating more choices for all. PSU is part of making that happen.

The reality is that this kind of change comes from collaboration and partnerships. PSU is in the position of needing to strategically understand which of those collaborations and partnerships both serve its own urban mission and help to make this a better region for all. To do so, PSU needs to critically understand what makes a good partner, and what it takes for the institution itself to be a good partner. It has to understand what the highest goals are, what tools we have to achieve them, what tools we lack, and what barriers we’ve constructed in the past that stand in the way of making real progress.

It's not so much that PSU needs to become an advocate or an activist. Instead, PSU needs to model what it means to understand the lessons of the past to address the challenges of the present and the future, how to seek the knowledge needed, and apply it in an ethical, strategic, and effective manner. These are things that universities can be good at. These are things that an urban university must be good at. Particularly in a region that is a place of newcomers,

where history is actually quite thick but little remembered or known, PSU has a central role in keeping an eye on the future while maintaining a critical and dynamic understanding of our context.

## Conclusion

As we look towards the next 50 years for PSU's urban university role in our city and region, one thing becomes clear: PSU needs to recommit to being the "urban university" for our region in the fullest meaning for that term. To fully embrace this role PSU, its faculty, administrators, staff, and board need to enlist the understanding and aid of key community stakeholders both within and outside of the region. Barriers abound, both for institutions in this state as well as for members of disciplines, those "invisible colleges", in higher education itself. Nonetheless, if PSU wants to pursue this path, it can. In 1972 the City said that it should. Today, the perspective and urgency suggested in the 1972 plan is as fresh as ever.

Make no mistake: the first step is not about getting individuals at PSU to be or do differently. First and foremost, it's about getting PSU, as an institution, landowner, neighbor, developer, and community partner to adopt a more focused and strategic approach to its urban mission than at any other time in its history. Downtown is in crisis, has an identity crisis, and as a partner in sharing the fate of downtown, PSU, too, shares these crises. What Portland experienced with the 1972 Downtown plan was that coming together to respond to these crises was both exciting and profitable.

Today there is no reason to believe that we can't, as a broad community of interests sharing a common fate, do it again. We've made and implanted great plans, and we need to do that again. As planners know, not to choose is actually making a choice. Today we have the opportunity to choose a better future and a better path forward. We are extremely fortunate to have those choices, and challenges, before us.